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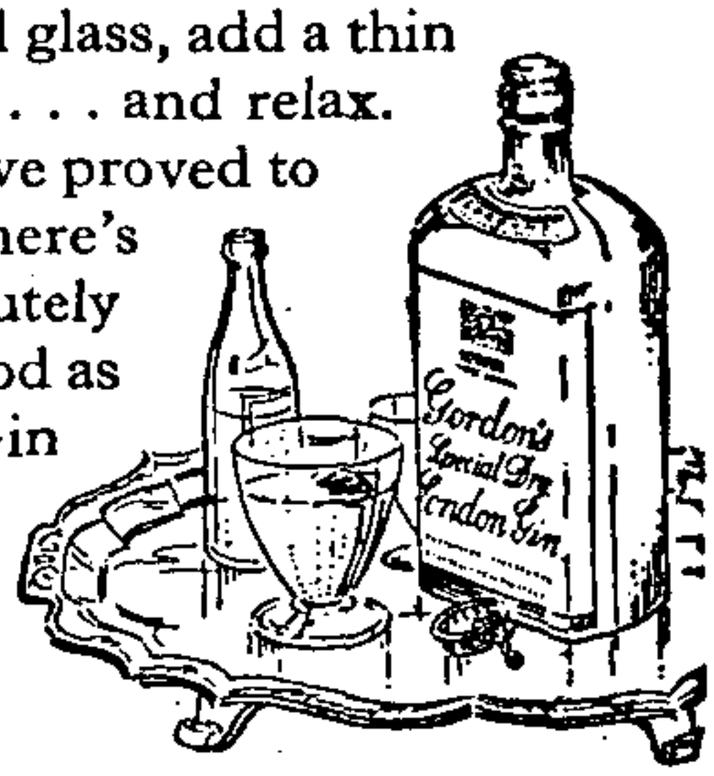

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WATCH HIM AT WORK:

H. E. BATES

ONE-MAN KINGDOM

THE book-lined study was very peaceful with its view of lawn and flagged garden. Mr. Bates, relaxed in an armchair, sat looking at the fire and talking quietly, with hesitations, as if his mind sometimes went ranging off and had to be fetched back from other pastures.

He described how he came to write *The Darling Buds of May*. For a long time he had nursed a wish to invent a story about the inmates of a certain house, an extraordinary dwelling he had seen, set among piles of mess and junk, with old sheds, nissen huts, broken coppers, rolls of netting, with chickens, ducks, geese, pigs, and a ginger horse, all beside an exquisite bluebell wood. The idea was dormant in his mind when, one day, driving with his wife, he saw a lorry halt by a village store. Down piled a huge Mum, small lively father, and eight children all laughing and singing. Mrs. Bates came out of the shop and told her husband that the father had bought ices for the children, paying for them from an immense roll of notes; plainly they could have had anything in the shop. This was the fertilizing episode that started the embryonic material working in his mind, and the result was *The Darling Buds*, written in about three weeks. It was great fun to write, he said, a sort of holiday task.

The birth of his stories, according to Mr. Bates, always requires more than one idea. The nucleus may be in his mind for months sometimes before a second seemingly unconnected idea fuses with it and starts the growth of a story which may then develop either through its characters or through its setting. *Death of a*

Huntsman belongs to the first category. Alternatively, he may start by feeling that some place has an intense attraction, an atmosphere of its own; from this atmosphere characters begin to loom out, as in *Summer in Salandar*.

When we suggested that his heroes were frequently victimized, if not by their surroundings then by their fellow-characters, the author chuckled commiseratingly.

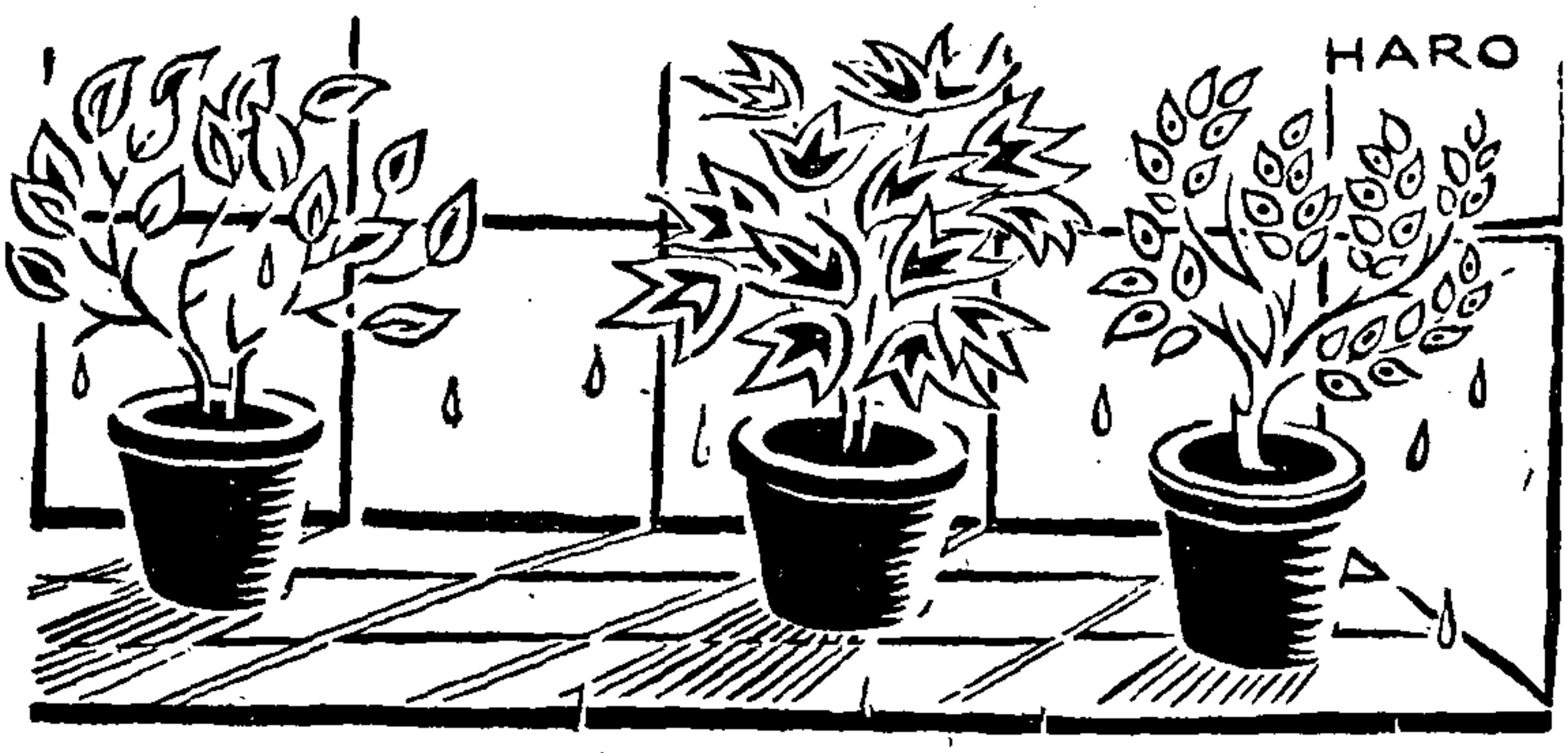
" All except for Pop," he said.

Mr. Bates talked about the short story, his favourite medium, with the love of a master-musician for his instrument. It is such a wonderfully flexible form, he said, it can be solid and complicated, or the merest sketch in which the reader must supply his own details. It is a difficult form, too—Bates has no time for people who think that, because a story is short, it is necessarily easy, that anyone can sit down and dash off fifteen hundred words after tea. A short story requires just as much care and work and technical experience as a longer piece of writing. His own preferred length is the novella, the twenty-thousand word story. What is the use, he said reasonably, of boring a reader in eighty thousand words, mainly padding, when the whole story can be told with so much more economy and effect in a quarter of the length?

A fast writer, Bates works every day in the mornings only. He writes solely for himself, and was rather horrified at the suggestion that some writers have a specific reader in mind.

When he has finished writing for the day he gardens, out of doors or in his greenhouse; he is very green-fingered and his house is full of large thriving plants in pots. He enjoys the sort of job that leaves his mind free to brood and ruminate about his current piece of writing.

H. E. Bates is something extremely rare: a writer who, from



the age of twenty on, has dedicated himself to nothing but writing. He was not, he said drily, ever a wine-waiter or a bronco-buster, but the adventures of the mind are as important as physical ones. He found the war, when he was with the R.A.F. in France and the Far East, a valuable and developing experience, with its discipline and the need to solve utterly alien problems; it enabled him to tackle later pieces of work—such as *Death of a Huntsman*, a very complicated and difficult story—with much greater ability. But he doesn't desire more of such cataclysms.

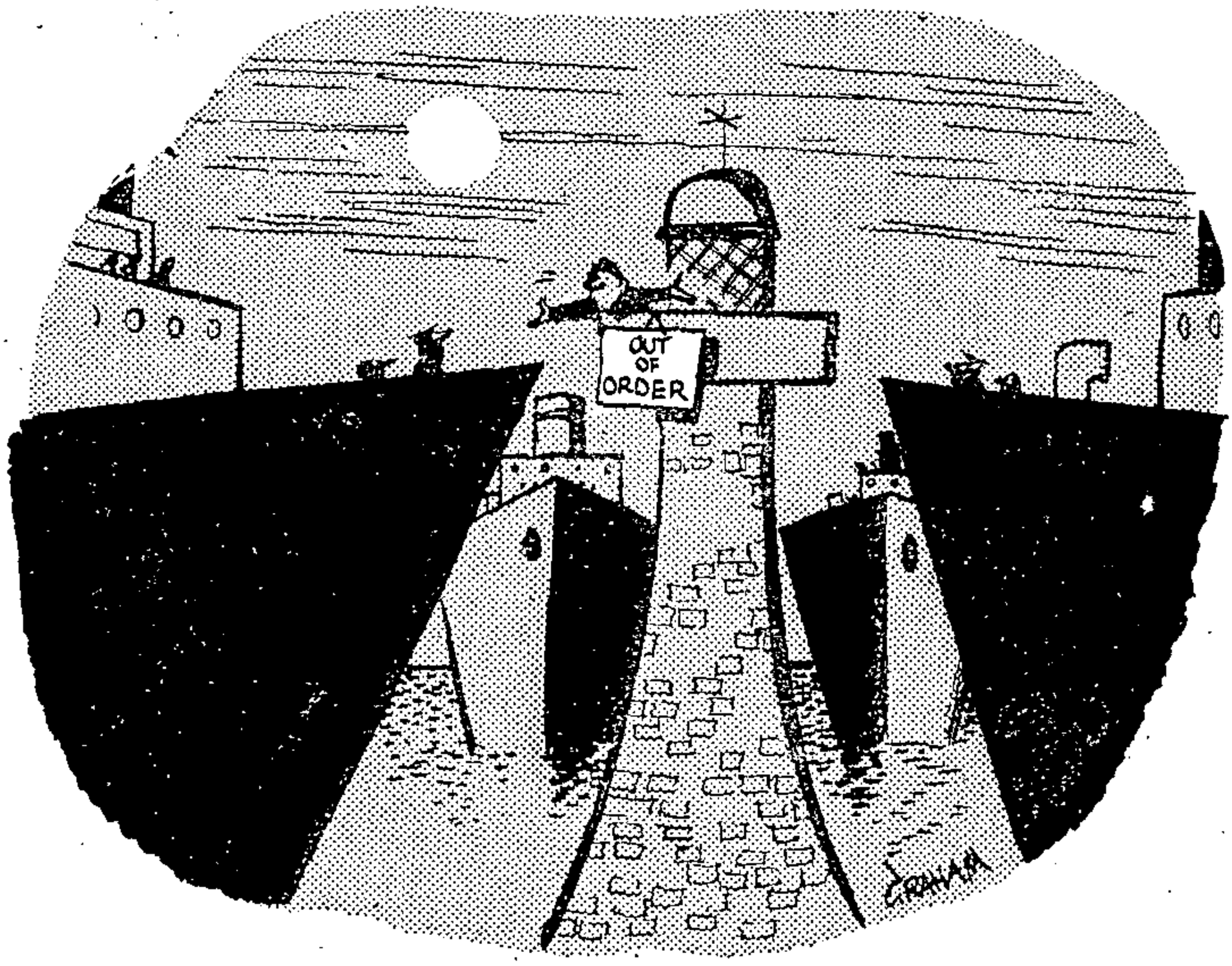
A writer's life, he said, is a solitary, curious little one-man kingdom; to an outsider it probably does not look very exciting. It calls for blind concentration, blind sacrifice in the exclusion of ordinary pleasures and social to-and-fro.

In a book on Edward Garnett, whose memory he holds in profound gratitude and affection, Bates wrote: "Creative art, like birth, is a pain. It rises from deep concentrations, out of mysterious impulses. Like love, it hurts and exorcises; it is a joy and it kills."

By the time we had finished talking it was almost completely dark outside the study windows. The bright jackets of the books had begun to reflect the fire's radiance and to glow, it seemed, with an inner life of their own.

JOHN SILVER

Horatio



WONDER HORSE

Red Eagle didn't run
he flowed

BY GEORGE BYRAM

WEBSTER says a mutation is a sudden variation, the offspring differing from the parents in some well-marked character or characters—and that certainly fits Red Eagle. He was foaled of registered parents, both his sire and dam descending from two of the best blood-lines in the breed. But the only thing normal about this colt was his colour, a beautiful chestnut.

I attended Red Eagle's arrival into the world. He was kicking at the sac that enclosed him as I freed his nostrils from the membrane. He was on his feet in one minute. He was straight and steady on his pasterns by the time his dam had him licked dry. He had his first feeding before he was five minutes old, and he was beginning to buck and rear and prance by the time I called Ben.

Ben came in the other end of the ramshackle barn from the feed lot. He was small as men go, but big for a jockey. Not really old at forty-two, his hair was grey and he was old in experience of horses.

Ben came into the loose box and as he saw the colt he stopped and whistled. He pushed back his hat and studied the red colt for a full five minutes. Though only minutes old, a horseman could see he was markedly different.

The bones from stifle to hock and elbow to knee were abnormally long. There was unusual length and slope of shoulder. He stood high in the croup and looked as if he was running downhill. He had a very long underline and short back. All this spelt uniquely efficient bone levers, and these levers were connected and powered by the deepest hard-twisted muscles a colt ever brought into this world. Unbelievable depth at the girth and immense spring to the ribs meant an engine of heart and lungs capable of driving those muscled levers to their maximum. Red Eagle's nostrils were a third larger than any we had ever seen and he had a large, loose windpipe between his broad jaws. He would be able to fuel the engine with all the oxygen it could use. Most important of all, the clean, sharp modelling of his head and the bigness and lustre of his eyes

indicated courage, will to win. But because of his strange proportions he looked weird.

"Good heavens," Ben said softly, and I nodded agreement.

Ben and I had followed horses all our lives. I as a vet and trainer for big breeders, Ben as a jockey. Each of us had outserved his usefulness. Ben had got too heavy to ride; I had got too cantankerous for the owners to put up with. I had studied blood-lines and knew the breeders were no longer improving the breed, but I could never make anyone believe in my theories. One owner after another had decided he could do without my services.

Ben and I had pooled our savings and bought a small ranch in Colorado. We had taken the mare that had just foaled in lieu of salary from our last employer. Barton Croupwell had laughed when we had asked for the mare rather than our money.

"Costello," he said to me, "you and Ben have two thousand five hundred dollars coming. That mare is nineteen years old. She could drop dead tomorrow."

"She could have one more foal, too," I said.

"She could, but it's five to two she won't."

"That's good enough odds for the kind of blood she's carrying."

Croupwell was a gambler who raised horses for only one reason: to make money. He shook his head. "I've seen old codgers set in their thinking, but you're the worst. I suppose you've got a stallion picked out—in case this mare'll breed."

"He doesn't belong to you," I said.

That needled him. "I've got stallions that bring five thousand for a stud fee. Don't tell me they aren't good enough."

"Their blood-lines are wrong," I answered. "Mr. Carvellier has a stallion called Wing Away."

"Carvellier's stallions cost money. Are you and Ben that rich?" He already knew what I had in mind.

"You and Carvellier trade services," I said. "It wouldn't cost you anything to have mare bred." He threw back his head and laughed. He was a tall thin man, always beautifully tailored, with black hair and a line of moustache. "I'm not a philanthropist," he said. "Do you really want this mare?"

"I said I did."

"You really think she'll get in foal?"

"I'll turn your odds round. I say it's five to two she will."

"I'll gamble with you," he said. "I'll send the mare over to Carvellier's. If she settles, I'll take care of the stud fee. If she doesn't, I keep the mare."

"And mine and Ben's two thousand five hundred dollars?"

"Of course."

"You're no gambler," I said, looking him in the eye, "but I'll take the bet."

Now, Ben and I were looking at a running machine that was something new on the face of the earth.

Our ranch was perfect for training the colt. It was out of the way and we took particular care that no one ever saw Red Eagle. By the time he was a yearling, our wildest estimate of what he would be had fallen short. Ben began to ride him when he was a coming two-year-old. By that time he had reached seventeen hands, he weighed twelve hundred pounds, and could carry Ben's nine stone as if it were nothing. Every time Ben jumped off him he was excited as a schoolboy. I was little better. This horse didn't run; he flowed.

Morning after morning as Ben began to open him up I would watch him coming down the course we had dozed out of the prairie and he looked like a great wheel with flashing spokes rolling irresistibly forward. Our stop-watch told us that Red Eagle, carrying as much weight as mature horses are asked to carry, had broken every world record for all distances and this on an imperfect course. Ben and I were scared.

One night when the racing season was close on us, Ben said nervously, "I've made a few calls to some jockeys I know. Croupwell's and Carvellier's and some others. The best two-year-olds they've got are just normal, good colts. Red Eagle will beat them by twenty lengths."

"You've got to keep him under restraint, Ben. You can't let anybody know what he can do."

"I can do anything with him out here by himself. But who knows what he'll do with other horses?"

"You've got to hold him."

"Listen, Cos, I've ridden some of the best and some of the toughest. I know what I can hold and what I can't. If Eagle ever takes it in his head to run, there'll not be much I can do about it."

"We've trained him carefully."

"Yes, but he'll go crazy if a horse starts to crowd him. Another thing, any horseman will see at a glance what we've got. They'll know we're not letting him extend himself."

We were standing out by the pine-pole paddock and I turned and looked at Red Eagle. Have you ever seen a cheetah? It's a cat. It runs faster than any other living creature. It's long-legged and long-bodied and it moves softly and gracefully until it starts to run; then it becomes a streak with a blur of legs beneath. Red Eagle looked more like a twelve-hundred-pound cheetah than a horse and he ran the same way.

"Well, he's a racehorse," I said. "If we don't race him, what'll we do with him?"

"We'll race him," said Ben, "but things ain't ever goin' to be the same again." That turned out to be pure prophecy.

We decided to start him on a western course. We had to mortgage the ranch to get the money for his entry fee, but we had him entered in plenty of time. Two days before the race we hauled him, blanketed, in a closed trailer and put him into his stall without anyone getting a good look at him. We took him out at dawn each morning before any other riders were exercising their horses.

This course was one where a lot of breeders tried their two-year-olds. On the day of the race the first person I saw was Croupwell. His mild interest told me he already knew we had an entry. He looked at my string-bean frame. "What's happened these three years, Costello? You don't appear to have eaten regularly."

"After today it'll be different," I told him.

"That colt you've entered, eh? He's not the bet you won from me, is he?"

"The same."

"I see by the papers that Ben's riding. He must have lost weight too."

"Not so's you'd notice."

"You're not expecting a two-year-old to carry nine stone in its first race!"

"He's used to Ben," I said casually.

"Costello, I happen to know you mortgaged your place to get the entry fee." He was looking at me speculatively. His gambler's instinct told him something was amiss. "Let's have a look at the colt."

"You'll see him when we bring him out to be saddled," I said and walked away.

You can't lead a horse like that among a group of horsemen without things happening. Men who spend their lives with horses know what gives a horse reach and speed and staying power. It didn't take an expert to see what Red Eagle had. When we took the blanket off him in the saddling enclosure, every jockey and owner began to move close. In no time there was a milling group of horsemen in front of where Ben and I were saddling Eagle.

Carvellier, a handsome white-haired Southern gentleman, called me to him. "Costello, is that Wing Away's colt?"

"Your signature's on his papers," I said.

" I'll give you fifty thousand dollars for his dam."

" She's dead," I said. " She died two weeks after we'd weaned this colt."

" Put a price on the colt," he said without hesitation.

" He's not for sale," I answered.

" We'll talk later," he said, and turned and headed for the betting windows. Every man in the crowd followed him. I saw several stable-hands pleading with acquaintances to borrow money to bet on Eagle despite the extra weight he would be carrying. By the time the pari mutuel windows closed, our horse was the odds-on favourite, and nobody had yet seen him run.

" I'm glad we didn't have any money to bet," said Ben, as I legged him up. " A dollar will only make you a dime after what they've done to the odds."

The falling odds on Red Eagle had alerted the crowd to watch for him. As the horses paraded before the stands there was a rippling murmur of applause. He looked entirely unlike the other eight horses on the course. He padded along, his head bobbing easily, his long hind legs making him look as if he was going downhill. He took one step to the other mincing thoroughbreds' three.

I had gone down to the rail and as Ben brought him by, heading for the gate where the six-furlong race would start, I could see Eagle watching the other horses, his ears flicking curiously. I looked at Ben. He was pale. " How is he? " I called.

Ben glanced at me out of the corners of his eyes. " He's different."

" Different! " I called back edgily. " How? "

" Your guess is as good as mine," he called back.

Eagle went into the gate at his assigned place on the outside as docilely as we'd trained him to. But when the gate flew open, the rush of horses startled him. Breaking through, he opened up five lengths on the field in the first sixteenth of a mile. The crowd went whoosh with a concerted sigh of amazement.

" Saints in heaven, hold him," I heard myself saying.

Through my binoculars, I could see the riders on the other horses studying the red horse ahead of them. Many two-year-olds break wild, but no horse opens five lengths in less than two hundred yards. I saw Ben steadying him gently, and as they went round the first turn, he had slowed him until the field moved up to within a length.

That was as close as any horse ever got. Round the turn a couple of riders went after Eagle and the field spread briefly into groups of three and two and two singles. I could see the two horses behind Eagle make their move. Eagle opened another three lengths before they hit the turn into the straight and I could

see Ben fighting him. The two that had tried to take the lead were used up and the field came by them as all the riders urged their horses on for the last furlong.

Eagle seemed to sense the concerted effort behind him and his rate of flow changed. It was as if a racing car had its accelerator floor-boarded. He came into the straight gaining a half-length every time his feet hit the turf.

When he passed the post he was a hundred yards ahead of the nearest horse and still going away. Ben had to take him completely round the course before Eagle realized there were no horses behind him. By the time Ben walked him into the winner's stand, Eagle's sides were rising and falling evenly. He was only damp, not having got himself hot enough to sweat.

The first thing I remember seeing was Ben's guilty expression.

"I tried to hold him," he said. "When he realized something was trying to outrun him he got so damn mad he didn't even know I was there."

The loudspeaker had gone into a stuttering frenzy. Yes, the world's record for six furlongs had been broken. Not only broken, ladies and gentlemen; five seconds had been cut from it. No, the win was not official. Track vets had to examine the horse. Please keep your seats, ladies and gentlemen.

Keep their seats, be damned! Every man, woman, and child was going to see at close range the horse that could run like that. There had been tears in my eyes as Eagle rolled down the straight. You couldn't stay calm when you saw what these people had seen.

The rest of that day sorted itself into blurred episodes. First, the vets checked Eagle's teeth, his registration papers, his date of foaling, and finally rechecked the number tattooed in his lips to make sure he was a two-year-old. Then they tested to make sure he had not been stimulated. They found measurements so unbelievable that they seriously questioned whether this animal was a horse. They went into a huddle with the course officials.

There was loose talk of trying to rule Eagle off the courses. Carvellier pointed out that Eagle's papers were in order, his own stallion had sired him, he was a thoroughbred of accepted bloodlines, and there was no way he could legally be ruled ineligible.

"If that horse is allowed to run," said one track official, "who will race against him?"

Croupwell was seated at the conference table, as were most of the other owners. "Gentlemen," he said suavely, "aren't you forgetting the handicapper?"

The job of a handicapper is to decide how much weight each horse is to carry. It is a known fact that a good handicapper can make any field of horses come in neck and neck by imposing

greater weights on the faster horses. But Croupwell was forgetting something. Usually, only older horses run in handicaps.

I jumped to my feet. "You know two-year-olds are not generally handicapped," I said. "They race under allowance conditions."

"True," said Croupwell. "Two-year-olds usually do run under arbitrary weights. But it is a flexible rule, devised to fit the existing situation. Now that the situation has changed arbitrarily the weights must be changed."

Carvellier frowned angrily. "Red Eagle was carrying nine stone against seven and a half stone for the other colts. You would have to impose such weights to give the other runners a sporting chance you'd break him down."

Croupwell shrugged. "If that should be true, it is unfortunate. But we have to think of the good of racing. You know that its life-blood is betting. There will be no betting against this horse in any race it's entered."

Carvellier rose. "Gentlemen"—the way he said it was an insult—"I have been breeding and racing horses all my life. It has always been my belief that racing was to improve the breed, not kill the best horses." He turned to Ben and me. "At your convenience I would like to speak with you."

Ben and I paid off the loan we'd used for the entry fee, bought ourselves some presentable clothes, and went up to Carvellier's hotel.

"Hullo, Ben; good to see you," he said. "Costello, I owe you an apology. I've disagreed with you on blood-lines for years. You've proved me wrong."

"You've been wrong," I agreed, "but Red Eagle is not the proof. He would have been a good colt if he was normal—maybe the best—but what he actually is has nothing to do with blood-lines."

"Do you think he's a mutation—something new?"

"Completely."

"How much weight do you think he can carry and still win?"

I turned to Ben and he said, "He'll win carrying any weight. He'll kill himself to win."

"It's too bad you couldn't have held him," said Carvellier. "Five seconds cut from the record! Don't fool yourself, they'll weight him until even tendons and joints such as his can't stand it. Will you run him regardless?"

"What else will there be to do?"

"Hm. Yes. Well, maybe you're right. But if they break him down, I have a proposition to make to you."

We thanked him and left.

Ben and I planned our campaign carefully. "We've got to train him with other horses," Ben told me. "If I can get him used to letting a horse stay a few lengths behind, I can hold him down."

We bought two fairly good platers with the rest of our first winnings and hired neighbouring ranchers to ride them. We began to see men with binoculars on the hills round our course. We let Red Eagle loaf so the boys with the binoculars never saw any great times.

The racing world had gone crazy over what Red Eagle had done to the records. But as time passed and the binocular boys reported he wasn't burning up his home course, the writers began to hint that it had been a freak performance—certainly remarkable, but could he do it again? This was the attitude we wanted. Then we put Red Eagle in his second race, this one a mile and a sixteenth.

It was a big stakes race for two-year-olds. We didn't enter him until the last minute. Even so, the news got round and the course had never had such a large attendance and so little betting. The people didn't dare bet against Eagle, but he had only run at six furlongs and they weren't ready to believe in him and bet on him to run a distance. Because of the low pari mutuel take, we were very unpopular with the officials of that course.

"If there's any way you can do it," I told Ben, "hold him at the gate."

"I'll hold him if I can."

By this time Red Eagle had become used to other horses and would come out of the gate running easily.

When they sprang the gate on those crack two-year-olds that day, Ben had a tight rein and the field opened a length on Eagle before he realized he'd been double-crossed. When he saw horses *ahead* of him he went crazy. He swung far outside and caught the field before they were in front of the stands. He'd opened five lengths at the first turn. He continued to accelerate all the way, and the crowd had gone crazy too.

When he turned into the straight the nearest thing to him was the starting-gate the attendants hadn't quite had time to pull out of the way. Eagle swerved wide and then, as if the gate had made him madder, really turned it on. When he passed the winning post the first horse behind him hadn't entered the straight. I sat down weakly and cried. He had cut ten seconds off the world's record for a mile and a sixteenth.

The pandemonium did not subside when the race was over. NEW WONDER HORSE TURNS RACING WORLD TOPSY-TURVY,

said headlines all over the world. That was an understatement.

"The next time we run him," I told Ben, "they'll put two sacks of feed and a bale of hay on him."

Ben was gazing off into the distance. "You can't imagine what it's like to sit on all that power and watch a field of horses go by you backwards, blip, like that. You know something, Cos? He still wasn't flat out."

"Fine," I said sarcastically. "We'll run him against racing cars."

Well, they weighted him. The handicapper called for nine stone eleven. It was an unheard-of weight for a two-year-old to carry, but it wasn't as bad as I had expected.

At home we weighted him and eased him along for a few weeks. He didn't seem to notice the weight. The first time Ben let him out he broke his own record. I kept an eye on his legs and he never heated in the joints or swelled.

We entered him in the next race to come up. It rained for two days before the race and the track was a sea of mud. Some thought the "flying machine," as Red Eagle was beginning to be called, could not set his blazing pace in mud.

"What do you think?" I asked Ben. "He's never run in mud."

"Hell, Cos, that horse don't notice what he's running on. He just feels the pressure of something behind him trying to outrun him and it pushes him like a jet."

Ben was right. When the field came out of the gate that day, Red Eagle shot ahead like a bullet from a gun. He sprayed the others briefly with mud, then blithely left them, and when he came down the straight he was completely alone.

During the next few races, three things became apparent. First, the handicapper had no measuring-stick to decide what weight Eagle should carry. They called for ten stone, ten stone two, then ten stone five, and Eagle came down the straight alone. The second thing became apparent after Eagle had won carrying ten stone five. His next race he started alone. No one would enter against him. Third, Eagle was drawing the greatest crowds in the history of racing.

There were two big races left that season. They were one day and a thousand miles apart. The officials at both courses were in a dilemma. Whichever race Eagle entered would have a huge crowd, but it would be a walk-over and that crowd would bet its last dollar on Eagle, because the course was required by law to pay ten cents on the dollar. The officials resolved their dilemma by using the old adage: You can stop a goods train if you put enough weight on it. Red Eagle was required to carry the

unheard-of weight of twelve stone two pounds. Thus they hoped to encourage other owners to race against us and at the same time they'd have Eagle's drawing power.

Ben grew obstinate. "I don't want to hurt him and that weight'll break him down."

"Great," I replied. "Two worn-out old duffers with the world's greatest horse end up with two platers, a sand-hills ranch, and the winnings from a few races."

"I know how you feel," said Ben. "The only thing you could have got out of this was money, but I can ride him."

"Well," I said, trying to be philosophical about it, "I can watch him and that's almost as good as riding him."

I stopped and grabbed Ben's arm. "What did I say?"

Ben jerked his arm away. "Are you crazy?"

"Watch him! Ben, what's happened every time Eagle's run?"

"He's broken a record," said Ben matter-of-factly.

"He's sent several thousand people into hysterics," I amended.

Ben looked at me. "Are you thinking people would pay to see just one horse run?"

"Has there ever been more than one when Eagle's run? Come on. We're going to enter him."

We entered Eagle in the next to last race of the season. What I'd expected happened. All the other owners pulled out. They weren't racing against Red Eagle, even if he did carry twelve stone two. They all entered in the last race. No horse, not even Eagle—they thought—had the kind of stamina to make two efforts on successive days with a plane trip sandwiched between, so they felt safe.

The officials at the second course were jubilant. They had the largest field they had ever run. The officials at the first course had apoplexy. They wanted to talk to us. They offered plane fare and I flew down.

"Would you consider an arrangement," they asked, "whereby you would withdraw your horse?"

"I would not," I replied.

"The public won't attend a walk-over," they groaned, "even with the drawing power of your horse." What they were thinking of was that ten cents on the dollar.

"That's where you're wrong," I told them. "Advertise that the wonder horse is running unweighted against his own record and you'll have a sell-out."

Legally, they could not call off the race, so they had to agree.

On the way home I stopped at Carvellier's. We had a long talk and drew up an agreement. "It'll work," I said.

"Yes," agreed Carvellier, "it will work, but you must persuade Ben to run him just once carrying twelve stone two. We've got to scare the whole racing world to death."

"I'll persuade him," I promised.

"When I got home I took Ben aside. "Ben," I said, "every cowboy's horse has to carry more than twelve stone two."

"Yes, but a cow horse don't run a mile in just over a minute."

"Nevertheless," I said, "he'll run as fast as he can carrying that weight and it doesn't hurt him."

"But a cow horse has pasterns and joints like a cart horse. It just ain't built like a thoroughbred."

"Neither is Red Eagle," I answered.

"What's this all about? You've already arranged for him not to carry any weight."

"That's for the first race."

"First race! You ain't thinkin' of runnin' in both of them?"

"Yes, and that second one will be his last race. I'll never ask you to ride him carrying that kind of weight again."

"You ought to be ashamed to ask me to ride him carrying it at all." Then what I had said sunk in. "Last race! How do you know it'll be his last race?"

"I forgot to tell you I had a talk with Carvellier."

"Well, you had a talk with Carvellier. So what?"

"Ben," I pleaded, "trust me. See what Red Eagle can do with twelve stone two."

"All right," said Ben grudgingly, "but I ain't goin' to force him."

"Force him!" I snorted. "You've never been able to stop him."

Ben was surprised but I wasn't when Red Eagle galloped easily under the weight. Ben rode him for a week before he got up the nerve to let him run. Eagle was still way ahead of every record except his own. He stayed sound.

When we entered him in the second race all but five owners withdrew their horses. These five knew their animals were the best of that season, barring our colt. And they believed that Red Eagle, after a plane ride, a race the day before, and carrying twelve stone two, was fair competition.

At the first course Eagle ran unweighted before a packed stand. The people jumped and shouted with excitement as the red streak flowed round the course, racing the second hand of the huge clock that had been erected in front of the odds board. Ben was worried about the coming race and only let him cut a second off his previous record. But that was enough. The crowd went mad. And I had the last ammunition I needed.

The next day dawned clear and sunny. The going was firm. Every seat in the stand was sold and the in-field was packed. The press boxes overflowed with reporters, anxiously waiting to tell the world what the wonder horse would do. The crowd that day didn't have to be told. They bet their last dollar on him.

Well, it's all history now. Red Eagle, carrying twelve stone two, beat the next fastest horse by five lengths. All the fences in front of the stands were torn down by the crowd trying to get a close look at Red Eagle. The course lost a fortune and three officials had heart attacks.

A meeting was called and they pleaded with us to remove our horse from competition.

"Gentlemen," I said, "we'll make you a proposition. You noticed yesterday that the gate for Eagle's exhibition was the largest that course ever had. Do you understand? People will pay to watch Eagle run against time. If you'll guarantee us two exhibitions a season at each major course and give us sixty per cent of the gate, we'll agree never to run Eagle in competition."

It was such a logical move that they wondered they hadn't thought of it themselves. It worked out beautifully. Owners of ordinary horses could race them with the conviction that they would at least be somewhere in the running when the race finished. The officials were happy, because not only was racing secure again, but they made money out of their forty per cent of the gates of Eagle's exhibitions. And we were happy, because we made even more money. Everything has been serene for three seasons. But I'm a little concerned about next year.

I forgot to tell you the arrangement Carvellier and I had made. First, we had discussed a little-known aspect of mutations: namely, that they pass on to their offspring their new characteristics. Carvellier has fifty brood mares on his breeding farm, and Red Eagle proved so sure at stud that next season fifty carbon copies of him will be hitting the courses.

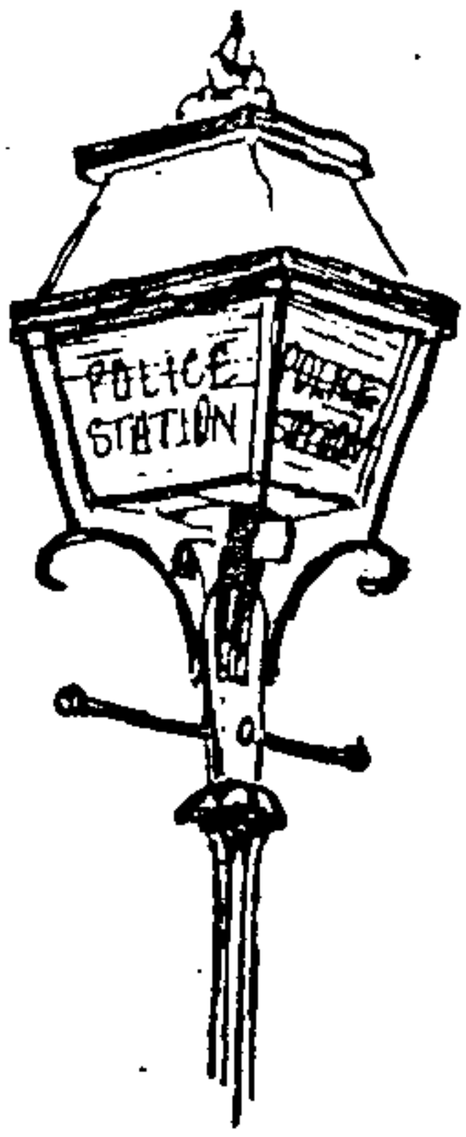
You'd never believe it, but they run just like their sire, and Ben and I own fifty per cent of each of them. Ben feels somewhat badly about it, but, as I pointed out, we only promised not to run Red Eagle.

★ ★ ★

ONE MAN'S MEAT, ANOTHER MAN'S POISSON

"My cook gets eighty pounds a year and gives me a kipper; Sullivan's cook gets five hundred pounds a year for giving him the same thing in French."

W. S. GILBERT



A PATRICK PETRELLA STORY

SOMEBODY

He left behind an impression of blazing eyes in a white face

BY MICHAEL GILBERT

THE Blue Hall was an unbeautiful building at the foot of the High Street, which had started life as a music hall, fallen on bad days, turned itself into a cinema, and failed again. Ultimately it was shut by the police, handed over to its creditors, and sold to a manufacturer of cardboard boxes; but at the time Sergeant Petrella joined Q Division it was living out a sort of second childhood, and paying its overheads by staging a season of Gala Dances.

These dismal affairs were popular only because they continued for an hour after the pubs shut, and so postponed, for sixty precious minutes, the time when the youth of Highside would otherwise have to go home to its bed. No drink was sold, but bottles found their way in and there was usually a stirring brew of trouble by the time the dance closed.

Petrella was not on duty. He was on his way home from the cinema, and had stopped to watch. Last out of the dance hall was a group of six—five boys and a girl. They were dressed in the height of youthful fashion, and were all of them drunk; not with alcohol, but with power, a power which had come to them suddenly out of the dark; the power to frighten and hurt their elders and betters, instead of being frightened and hurt by them.

The leader was in front, legs astride, duffel coat thrown back, surveying the streets as a pirate might survey his main. Petrella recognized him as Frankie Hopper, a small gangster, son of a heavy-duty driver. He had inherited his father's muscles, and not much more. On his arm was a girl, every bit of fifteen years old, Petrella judged, with startling chestnut hair tortured into a high pony-tail, her skinny legs in tight black jeans, and the rest of her in an older and dirtier duffel coat than Frankie's.

Having surveyed his subjects—the general public—and found

them to be in a reasonable state of submission, Frankie turned to business on hand.

He swung round, and pulled out one of his followers by the ear.

"You know what that is, Ruby?" he said. Ruby giggled.

"It's something we found tagging along with us this evening. It's got ambitions. It wants to join us."

Frankie laughed. Everyone laughed. Even the new boy laughed. He had a white face, black hair, a small, girlish mouth, and startling eyes. Petrella wondered for a moment if it was the effect of the neon light. They looked almost green.

"It's got a name, too. Hasn't it? Speak up, the lady wants to hear it."

"Rodney King," said the boy. He spoke clearly, and seemed neither frightened nor abashed.

"And guess what," said Frankie. "His mother still washes his hair for him."

Everyone laughed again, the victim as heartily as anyone.

Frankie seemed a little put out at his inability to disconcert. He decided that he had seen enough of Rodney.

"Now you run along home, like a good little boy," he said. "If you're out late, you know what'll happen? Your mother'll take down those fancy pants and smack your bot for you."

For a moment Rodney stood, silent, sizing up Frankie as a boxer sizes up an opponent before he hits him. Then he smiled sweetly, turned on his heel, and walked off.

Everyone laughed again as loudly as before. But Petrella was not certain that, in some indefinable way, the smaller boy had not carried off some of the honours of the encounter.

Petrella made his way home and went to bed.

It was six months later, in the course of some routine inquiries about stolen washing, that he met Mrs. King. The name was common enough, and failed to jog his memory. It was when he had finished talking to her that he saw someone he recognized at work in the shed on the other side of the yard, a boy with a white face and catlike eyes.

"That's Rod," said Mrs. King. "First it was wireless. Now it's motor cycles. Nasty dangerous things. Every time he goes out, I'm sure I don't know if he'll come back in one piece."

Petrella strolled over. Rodney looked up coldly. He was evidently used to interference.

"That's a nice machine you've got," said Petrella.

"Not bad," said the boy.

It was, in fact, an expensive model. He had the rear wheel stripped, and he looked as if he knew what he was about.

"Where'd you learn about motor cycles?"

"Out of a book," said the boy, and went on with the job. He had grown up a lot since Petrella had seen him last.

There had been other changes, as well. Frankie Hopper and two boys were coming down the road. They paused to lean over the fence and watch Rodney at work. They all seemed to be friends. In some way best known to himself, Rodney had passed his novitiate and become an accepted member of the gang. Hopper looked pleased with himself; as he talked there was a smile on his big, beefy face.

The next time Petrella saw Hopper, he was not smiling at all. He had passed beyond pleasure and displeasure, for he was dead. Riding his own motor cycle at some speed, down the hill outside his house, he had been seen to go into a bad skid, almost as if the rear wheel had locked solid. The bicycle had then somersaulted, throwing Hopper into a concrete light standard.

Petrella had a word with the mechanic who had picked up and inspected what was left of the machine.

"Could've happened to anyone," the mechanic said. "Chance in a million, really. That bolt—" he demonstrated—"it's what we call a loose thread. Give it time, it'll undo itself. That's why it has another bolt on top, which works the other way and locks it. The two together are perfectly safe. These got put on the wrong way round—that's all."

That was all, for the time being.

The bad riot at the Palace Pin-Table Arcade was almost a year later. When the word "trouble" was given, everyone in the station, regardless of rank, piled into the nearest police car and went there fast. For trouble was like a fire. If you caught it soon enough, you could put it out with a bucket. Leave it, and it grew.

The Palace Arcade was a blitzed shop behind the High Street, which had been roofed over and fitted out with electric grabs, fortune-telling machines, and pin-tables of all sorts. If your idea of amusement was losing money slowly, the Arcade was quite a good place to do it. If you spread your money out judiciously, you could spend an hour over losing a shilling.

Petrella arrived in a tender, under the command of the experienced Sergeant Gwilliam. "Stop short," he said to the driver. "Lock your car and come with us. Keep together and keep on your feet." They were on the fringe of a milling crowd. Beyond it was the centre of the disturbance, in the Arcade itself.

Petrella could hear the thud and splintering of glass as the tables went over, the shouts of the men, the stamping of feet, and above it all the shriller shouts of women.

Then they were in.

The crowd itself offered no resistance. The police burst straight through into the arena of the fight. It was the owner of the Arcade and two of his assistants, one hardly more than a boy, against a crowd of a dozen. Gwilliam headed for the nearest and biggest of the opposition, grabbed him by the neck, and put his head into a game of skill and chance. Then someone kicked him, and he really went into action. The gang had armed themselves with the heavy wooden pins from the skittle alley and were using them as clubs.

One of them swung at Petrella, who got under the blow and took his legs from under him with a trip. There was hardly room for manœuvre. A roar from the crowd signalled the arrival of further reinforcements, and next minute the riot was over as quickly as it had begun.

There were three bad casualties, a great deal of mess and damage, and ten arrests. It took most of the rest of the night to sort these out, identify the culprits, and get in touch with their families.

Petrella had the job of breaking the news to Mrs. King. After the first shock, her reaction seemed almost to be relief.

"Will they send him away?" she said.

"I don't think Rodney was one of the ringleaders," said Petrella. "My guess would be that he'll get off with a fine this time. But don't tell him so. A fright won't do him any harm."

"I can't do nothing with him," said Mrs. King. "Not any longer. He's got ideas. He's got to be somebody, if it kills him."

Petrella saw Rodney next morning at the station. He seemed to be rather pleased with himself. But if he was unmoved, other people were worrying on his behalf.

That evening Petrella had a visitor. It took him a moment to recognize Ruby, for she had grown too. "I got your name from Rod's mother," she said. "She thought you might put in a word for him. He wasn't one of the worst."

"But he was there."

"It's important," said the girl. Petrella was puzzled by her manner. She was scared of something, but not, he thought, of him. "He's got a job, a good one, with Hicks's Garage. He doesn't want to lose that."

Petrella nearly said, He ought to have thought of that before he started, but realized that it would be pointless. Instead, he said, "You haven't introduced yourself."

"I'm Ruby Cross." She gave a perfunctory smile. "My father keeps The Warwick Arms, up Southgate Street. I'm Rod's girl."

"Does your father approve of that?"

"Oh—Dad. He's old-fashioned."

Petrella let this go, too. "Weren't you a friend of Frankie Hopper's?" he asked. He saw it again, in her eyes. There was no doubt about it. It was fear.

"Look, mister," she said, "I didn't come here to answer a lot of questions. I was just to tell you, you've gotter get Rod outer this. If you don't he'll be angry, and when he's angry he acts stupid."

It was not until two evenings later, towards closing time, that Petrella was able to walk up to The Warwick Arms and have a word with Mr. Cross. He found a badly-worried man.

"Ruby's all right," he said. "Really she is. If her mother was alive, she'd be quite all right. It's just that, in this job, I haven't got enough time for her. Every evening I'm tied up till eleven and after. There's no place for her. I tried telling her to bring her friends round here. Friends! You know the sort they are."

Petrella said he knew the sort they were.

"And that boy she's took up with now—Rod. He's the worst of the lot. Do you know, after he'd been coming here once or twice he put up a scheme for swindling my brewery out of twenty pounds a week." Despite himself Mr. Cross laughed. "It would have worked, too. He wanted fifty-fifty. I told him to go away and stay away, and his friends as well. Then he got ugly. Told me they could do me a lot of harm. Kick up a row in the bar. Drive away the customers. Maybe lose me my licence. And do you know how old he is? Sixteen."

"He's an odd boy," said Petrella.

It was late when Mr. Cross let him out of the side entrance, and he was hardly surprised to find Rod waiting on the other side of the street.

"You going to be able to put in a word for me?" the boy said, without preamble.

"What word can I put in?" said Petrella. "You were there. You did as much damage as anyone. The proprietor says you didn't start it. It was two bigger boys—"

"Harrison and Lawton. They were the leaders. I expect they'll put 'em away, won't they?"

"Could be," said Petrella. "You don't sound very upset about it."

"I don't care about them," said Rod. "They talked too much. Look here, you put a word in for me, and I got a chance to get a discharge. It's important."

Petrella had had a long day. He said, "I'm going home. You take your chance with the others." He left behind him an impression of blazing eyes in a white face.

Two days later Superintendent Haxtell sent for Petrella. He had a worried look on his face.

"I've got the most extraordinary report," he said. "About you. Do you frequent licensed premises after hours?"

Petrella's conscience was clear. "I very rarely frequent them even in hours," he said. "I'm so tired in the evening that I usually go to bed and stay there."

"That's what I thought. This public-spirited citizen has reported that you were seen to leave The Warwick Arms, by the side door, at twenty-five minutes to midnight."

"Oh," said Petrella. "Yes. That's true. I was on duty. Questioning the landlord."

"I don't doubt it," said Haxtell. "All the same, it would be better, on the whole, to question landlords in licensing hours."

Petrella accepted the rebuke. It was perhaps a coincidence that when he came out of Crown Road Police Station he should have found Rodney on the pavement.

Rodney seemed pleased with life. He smiled broadly when he saw Petrella, then turned on his heel and disappeared. Petrella hesitated for a moment, then went on his way. This was one feud he had no desire to pursue.

During the months that followed he had news, from time to time, of Rodney's progress. He was now boss and, under his leadership, the gang was pursuing its activities in more ingenious and less detectable ways than breaking up pin-table saloons.

A cinema would be attacked by systematic seat-slashing, a most expensive form of damage to remedy. A handsome contribution to the local Boys' Group Annual Camp—an organization that existed only in Rodney's fertile imagination—ensured an instant cessation of the nuisance. Isolated shops started losing stock heavily, and some of them were glad to take advantage of Rodney's suggestion that his friends should be hired at moderate rates to keep a lookout. The lookout was evidently effective, since all pilfering from that shop stopped at once. Other shopkeepers were not amused and went round to the police.

"It's the old American racket of protection," said Haxtell. "It's got to be stopped."

"Nothing succeeds like success," said Petrella. "I should say Rodney's got twenty or thirty boys on his pay roll now. And he pays them. He must be making good money."

"He'll stick his neck out soon," said Haxtell. "Watch for it."

Petrella had not long to watch.

That evening, when he was alone for a moment in the C.I.D. room, an urgent visitor was announced. It was Ruby. Her self-possession was gone and she was very close to tears.

"You've got to come," she said.

"What's up?"

"It's Rod. You've got to stop him."

"We'll get on quicker in the end," said Petrella, deliberately slow, "if you'll tell me what it's all about. Sit down. No, I won't talk to you unless you sit down. That's better."

"It's Dad," she said. "He started it."

"Your father—he keeps that pub—The Warwick Arms. I went to see him."

"That's right. He used to let the boys come there. Then they got—then we had a bit of trouble, and he chased 'em off. Then they started coming again. Last Saturday, Dad kicked Rod out."

"Literally?" said Petrella, trying to conceal his pleasure. "I mean, did he actually kick him?"

"There was a bit of a fight."

"And Rod finished up outside."

"If he'd had the boys with him, it would have been different," said Ruby.

"I expect it would," said Petrella. "After all, six of them ought to be able to hold an old man down and kick him."

Ruby hardly heard him. She was alone in a private world of violence and panic and fear.

"He's going back tonight, to settle him," she said.

"And the boys?"

"They won't have any part of it."

"What?"

"They won't help him."

"You're not suggesting, are you," said Petrella, "that *I* should help him?"

She looked at him in a hopeless sort of way, the tears now visible in her eyes.

"Don't you see?" she said. "He's got to do something, otherwise people wouldn't think he was anybody. He's got hold of a gun."

That suddenly made sense.

"All right," said Petrella. "I'll send a man round to the pub to warn your father, and another to stand by. I'll talk to Rod. Where's he now?"

"He's got a room of his own now," said Ruby. "I'm not coming with you."

"At least you can show me where it is," said Petrella.

It was a small house, in Carfax Hill Road, which is a short cut, for those who know it, between the Helenwood by-pass and the High Street. Steep, dirty front steps gave directly on to the pavement. Petrella ran up them. The front door was ajar. He

went straight on, up the stairs, making as little noise as he could, but not wasting any time. In such cases, speed was important. At the end of the passage, at the back, Ruby had said.

As Petrella touched the handle he sensed that the door was locked, turned his approach into a shoulder charge, and crashed straight into the room.

Rod was lying on the bed, propped up on one elbow, and his hand was already under the pillow.

Petrella grabbed the first thing he saw, which was a china soap-dish, and threw it hard. It missed, and splintered on the wall, but Rod stopped, flung his left arm in front of his face, and the diversion was enough.

Petrella was on top of him. He seized his head and banged it against the bed rail, realizing as he did so that it was a mistake. He should have gone for his hands. The gun went off, once, then again. Petrella felt as if he had been kicked hard in the side.

He managed to knock Rod's head once more against the bed, heard him cry out, and then they were on the floor, the gun sliding away from them under the bed.

Then Rod was gone. Petrella got up a lot more slowly. He felt as if he was very badly winded. It was not till he touched his coat that he knew about the blood. He got out onto the landing.

A woman in a dirty housecoat was standing at the top of the stairs, screaming on one horrible, steady, high-pitched note. Petrella pushed past her, fell down the stairs, picked himself up, and crawled to the front door.

In the street, something seemed to have happened. A young man in overalls and a crash helmet was saying, over and over again, to a fast-gathering crowd, " I couldn't help it. It wasn't my fault. He ran straight out. I couldn't help it."

" That's right," said a large navvy. " I saw it. You couldn't help it."

" He ran straight under my wheel," said the motor cyclist.

Petrella gathered himself together, stepped forward, took a quick look at what was left of Rod, looked away again, and said in a loud voice, " I'm a police officer."

Then he fainted into the arms of the navvy.

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In next month's ARGOSY

KEM BENNETT—Intriguing Parisian adventure

H. E. BATES MICHAEL GILBERT

BRIAN CLEEVE—Colourful new Irish story

GAME WITH A GODDESS

With a little cry of anger
Wang Mu tore her gown and trod it underfoot

BY LESLIE BONNET

AS soon as Chu Yuan-Chang came into the temple hall with his little broom of fine twigs the gods used to begin to grumble.

There were hundreds of them. Some were enormous, their shoulders and heads half hidden in the roof shadows. Some were of more modest size. There were gods of fire and of water, of pestilence and of famine, of food, of learning, of motherhood, of cooking. Hardly a thing you could wish for or an evil you would avert but had its god or its goddess in the great hall of the Temple of Heavenly Condescension on the Mushan mountain in the western region of China.

The most wearying task in the temple had always been the sweeping of it. .It was not just a question of cleaning the floors. In the great hall the tops of the stone platforms upon which the gods stood had also to be swept. All the way round the big feet of each god and all about the skirt-hems of each goddess the pedestals had to be swept meticulously with deft strokes of the little broom.

Because it was a labour of such heart-frustrating nicety it was, of course, entrusted always to the newest and youngest of the monks.

How many hundreds of aspiring young priests had brushed diligently about the bases of the gods and, with wishful tenderness, about the extremities of the goddesses, it cannot be said. But at the time of which I am speaking this duty was in the hands of one Chu Yuan-Chang.

This young monk was the fortunate possessor of a body of agreeable proportions and of a fresh and comely face. Nor was that all. Chu Yuan-Chang had a manner and a voice of extreme persuasiveness.

And it was because of these last gifts that the gods grumbled so profoundly upon his coming with his little broom of fine

twigs. Chu Yuan-Chang would come pattering into the gloom of the great hall, his rusty-brown gown flying, his little broom twitching, his face alight with an obedience-promoting smile. " Now, honourable Heavenly Ones, if you will be so gracious . . ."

At first the tall throng of statues had complied with his wishes out of sheer good humour; but by the time of which I am speaking, the practice had hardened into a resented habit. Nevertheless, at his request the whole host of gods shifted their heavy feet and climbed stiffly, joints creaking, from off their pedestals. They stood in an awkward array, their giant faces still smiling, laughing, scowling, or gnashing sharp teeth just as they had been painted, while Chu Yuan-Chang quickly brushed the dust and the plaster flakes from their platforms.

If Chu were a little longer than usual in this performance there might be heard an impatient shuffling of ponderous feet; but there was never any direct protest; and when the young acolyte, with a quick smile, expressed permission for them to return, they all climbed, groaning with stiffness, back onto their pedestals again.

Among all this throng there was only a single Heavenly One who refused to move. I need hardly tell you that this was Hsi Wang Mu herself; the Golden Mother of the Tortoise; the Pure Essence of Femininity; the embodiment of yin, the female idea; the mother of nine sons and twenty-four daughters; ever young, ever fresh, ever yielding—except in the matter of stepping down off pedestals at the behest of some cursed young priestling.

And so Chu Yuan-Chang was compelled always to sweep laboriously all around the hem of her rippling white gown. As he did this (so lamentably does familiarity with the gods induce presumption) he would sometimes rest his smooth cheek against the still smoother thigh of Hsi Wang Mu, just above where her embroidered tunic of red reached her dimpled knee. Sometimes he thought (but who more fanciful than ardent young men?) that he could detect some slight convulsion of response to his impertinence; and he would look up boldly into the face of the goddess, framed in the shawl of pale gold which fell over her plump shoulders. But the face, exquisite in line, set in a smile of mocking wisdom, did not change its expression of well-remembered felicities.

To a high-spirited young man the collaboration-declining attitude of Hsi Wang Mu was a source of chagrin. During the rest of the day's duties and in the long nights he pondered often upon the obstinacy of this sacred creature who embodies all the essential attributes of womanhood.

And one night in the Season of Great Heat, when outside the

dormitory of the acolytes the bull frogs crackled, mad with love, in the lotus lake, a thought came to him. He remembered that in the earliest days of the world Hsi Wang Mu had been much addicted to the sport of pitch-pot, with the playing of which she had beguiled idle moments with the god of the Immortals.

On the next morning, therefore, Chu Yuan-Chang appeared as briskly as ever in the great hall of the gods, carrying not only his little broom of fine twigs but also a large pot with a narrow neck and an armful of arrows.

He made his usual request. The gods lumbered to the ground groaning in an indolent fashion. He dusted the pedestals, taking care to deal with that one upon which Hsi Wang Mu still stubbornly remained, only in a perfunctory manner. When all the gods were upon their pedestals again, he cheerfully swept the floor.

That done, a little way in front of Hsi Wang Mu he set his jar upon the floor, and, standing back from it at the proper distance, which placed him just beside the goddess, he began to toss the arrows one by one in an attempt to throw them into the mouth of the jar.

This is a difficult feat; and Chu Yuan-Chang who, it may be, was not exerting the utmost of his skill, met with no success. However, he persisted with what must have appeared to be commendable perseverance. He threw, and threw again, and again.

In the great hall the light was pale and liquid. Only a dazzling bar of light away over by the towering portals reminded one of the hard brilliance of the sunlight in the courtyard. Somewhere down on a distant terrace a gong was being beaten. Inside the hall was a great stillness, and against the background hum of innumerable insects the only sounds were the puffing of the military god, Ching Lu, The Snorter, who was always short of breath after climbing his pedestal, and the click and rattle of Chu Yuan-Chang's arrows as they missed the mouth of the jar and fell to the pavement.

The gods stood still in that heavy, heated shade. Not a movement in all that serried throng. Or was there? Was that a slight motion of languid, power-concealing grace?

Indeed it was so. The astute young Chu Yuan-Chang felt, as he drew himself up after an unsuccessful throw, the most delicate of touches upon his arm. The contact was indeed so soft that he thought for a moment that a butterfly's wing had brushed his sleeve.

But, while he paused, a more significant pressure upon his arm made him aware that he had succeeded in his ruse. He looked up, a little fearfully. Hsi Wang Mu was bending down

upon him with a shy smile of entreaty upon a sport-loving face.

Who could be so churlish at that moment as to remember those nine sons and those twenty-four daughters borne, after all, so many thousands of years ago? With the impulsive eagerness of a maiden scarcely of the age for the "testing of the blossom," the goddess stretched a white arm from out of her long red sleeve.

Chu Yuan-Chang humbly offered her an arrow. Grasping it, Hsi Wang Mu leapt lightly down onto the floor, and, with moist lips firmly compressed, leaned forward and flung the arrow towards the jar with a little shriek of excitement. Its barb struck the side of the jar with a dull click. It rattled onto the floor. Hsi Wang Mu made a little rueful smile which the young man was bold enough to answer. Then, leaning well forward, he swung his arrow towards the jar. The same dull click, the same empty rattle announced his failure.

From up in the deep gloom of the roof the contorted faces gazed down upon this amiable sport. Their carved expressions did not alter, so that it would be idle to wonder if some relish of ancient indecorums warmed their regard. But among the images of goddesses a certain restiveness might have been noticed. Tou Mu, cold Goddess of the North Star, in particular, twitched irritably the fingers of all her six hands.

But no thought of these petrified spectators clouded the minds of the two players. Each of them was too preoccupied with the irritation of ill-success. Throw after throw was made. The jar still did not contain one single arrow.

So overcome with petty annoyance was Hsi Wang Mu that she had to lean for an instant in laughing anger upon the firm shoulder of Chu Yuan-Chang. In a moment her head sank in weariness. As lightly as ever Chu had brushed round the hem of her skirt, so softly now her cheek, warm and fragrant, swept the young man's neck.

How nearly then was this game forgot. But Chu, still contestant, made himself take up another arrow. Clink. Clatter. The game was making him unbearably heated. While his goddess made another attempt he rapidly shed his gown, the folds of which had, in any case, much impeded his efforts.

Now, clad only in short tunic and sandals, he made another attempt. With stern joy he saw the arrow fall neatly into the mouth of the jar. He turned to Hsi Wang Mu with a laugh of triumph. She, generous in disposition, embraced him.

After a little while, when Chu Yuan-Chang had freed himself, the goddess picked up another arrow. She, too, seemed sensible of the heavy morning heat. With an impatient gesture she flung

off the gold scarf that hung over her shoulders. She stooped to throw the arrow.

How tiresomely the long sleeves of her tunic hindered her arms! With practised and unhurried skill she undid all of the little carved golden buttons and flung the tunic aside also. In her gown, white as the magnolia flower, she leaned forward and threw the arrow. It was the click, perhaps, and the clatter that discomposed her. After this failure she turned to Chu, eyes moist, lips down-drooping, like a hurt child.

Perhaps to avoid another embrace Chu patted her cheek and handed her another arrow. With hard eyes the goddess bent again for the throw. She trod on the hem of her gown.

With a little cry of anger Hsi Wang Mu tore her gown from neck to hem and trod it under her feet. Freed of every encumbrance, glowing honey-golden in the pale temple light, she poised herself and flung the arrow with a slim arm. Plop! It landed exactly in the jar's neck. Now two arrows, upright, quivered there together. She turned to Chu Yuan-Chang with a delighted laugh. Alas! He had not been looking at the arrow.

It would not have taken Hsi Wang Mu long to have resumed her garments; but, because of a certain hesitancy which was caused in her by the ardent regard of Chu Yuan-Chang, the moment passed; and other moments followed in which such a rehabilitation would have been discourteous.

While the gods still scowled, laughed, or gnashed their teeth above them these two made play together, the goddess peremptory, the acolyte amazed, alarmed, almost smothered.

So disordered in mind was the young Chu Yuan-Chang that he did not come properly to his senses until the afternoon. The goddess was gone. Her pedestal stood empty. Chu shook his head in bewilderment; and limped away to his belated duties.

And then there began such an afternoon, such an evening, and such a night of unbelievable happenings, as had never been known in the Monastery of the Temple of Heavenly Condescension.

Perhaps Chu, who already knew the ten parts of the matter, was better able than others to note the effects of the errant Goddess of the Pure Essence of Femininity. He would be readier than most, perhaps, to perceive upon the faces of usually morose elder brethren impressions of incredulous delight, intense stupefaction, emotional storminess, or extreme distress. What no one could fail to notice was the odd manner in which first one monk and then another, as if in obedience to some unseen invitation, would withdraw quickly from his proper task and absent himself, without pausing for apology.

The master of the neophytes, presiding over the chanting of seemly words for the benefit of wealthy, dead patrons, absented himself. The timekeeper was left to conduct the service with steady clacks on his wooden drum. The young chanters themselves went off, one by one, until the timekeeper only remained, beating off a measure to an empty huddle of stools.

With darkness the confusion redoubled.

Only with the reluctant daylight did order return. For fear of evil consequences no monk commented upon the common experience. Only the ruler of the monastery, whose title was The Most Clear, made any remark. He, with laudable other-worldliness, did mention that he had that night experienced a most remarkable dream; made as if to say more; then shook his head, and kept silence.

Everything was now as before. Hsi Wang Mu was back upon her pedestal. The comfortable routine of the Temple of Heavenly Condescension could be resumed.

Indeed, it would have been easy to argue that these happenings had never been. It is true that purchasers of healing talismans on that mad day came back urgently demanding more, and claiming for them virtues far beyond what had ever been imputed to them. But that in itself was not conclusive.

But when Chu Yuan-Chang went to sweep the great hall; and when at his desire the gods and goddesses descended from their pedestals, down with them, but with much more alacrity and grace, leapt Hsi Wang Mu. And by the flash of pale leg one could plainly see that her white gown was still torn.

Would that the story ended thus, in tacit embarrassment and wistful regrets. But it must be told that when it was about that season when farmers look with satisfaction upon the rice-crop swollen to harvest, Chu Yuan-Chang found himself stealing mistrustful glances at the docile goddess. There seemed to him to be an air of more than admiring self-satisfaction and jauntiness in her aspect. It could not be! In his agitation Chu's fingers plucked his little broom bare of twigs.

Alas! It was so. There was without doubt something softer, something forward-looking about the smile on the wise and lovely face of Hsi Wang Mu.

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FEBRUARY COMPETITION

Prizes of two guineas in our Argosy Survey Competition go to J. H. B. Carson, Brixham, Devon; James Tyler, Sandwich, Kent; and Mrs. Camille Mirepoix, Tanganyika, East Africa.

★ **New short complete novel**

THE MAN WITH A PAST

BY PAUL GALLICO

THE spare, well-groomed stranger with the pale, light-coloured eyes hesitated, pen in hand, before the hotel register pushed towards him by the young reception clerk.

The reason for his hesitation was that he had two identities. If he used the first, the affair was over then and there, for in spite of his fame he was rarely recognized in his private capacity.

But if he registered in the name by which he was best known . . .

He had foreseen as he pulled up his elegant black coupé, what this hotel in the small backwater town of Huntsville, Iowa, would be like: the gloom of the lobby, the greasy, brown leather, overstuffed arm-chairs, potted palms behind them, the smell of stale tobacco.

On the way to the desk, an announcement bearing an urgent message dated a week ago had caught his eye:

SAVE HUNTSVILLE!
Don't Let Huntsville Die!

CITIZENS' MEETING TONIGHT TO DISCUSS WAYS AND MEANS OF BRINGING NEW BRANCH OF GIBSON PACKING COMPANY TO HUNTSVILLE.
BE THERE! ALFRED ZINNEMAN, *Editor*, *Huntsville Gazette*.

The traveller, a well-built man slightly above average height, with crisp, dark hair still ungreyed, nodded towards the notice and asked, "What happened?"

The clerk replied, "Nuthin'. All they did was sit around and jaw and pass the buck. They're invitin' the chairman of the company to the next civic lunch."

The stranger laughed savagely. It was just what he would have expected. He asked, "Got a room and bath for the night?"

The clerk said, "I guess so," and from force of habit glanced back at his rack of keys which showed little sign of occupancy.

The man poised his pen, and wondered why he had obeyed the impulse to leave the main highway and break his journey there.

He was despondent, sore, spiritually bruised, and angry. He felt the need to make something happen that would distract or divert him, for he was sick to death of his profession, of the life he had been leading, and of himself. But he suspected that an even deeper reason was that he had come to satisfy his curiosity. He therefore hesitated no longer. In the bold hand, practised by the signing of many thousands of autographs, he inscribed himself, *John James Craig.*

He pushed the register back to the clerk who goggled at the signature, turned turkey-red in the face, and stammered, "Are you t-t-the John James Craig?"

"If you mean the actor, yes."

The clerk stuck out his hand with a boyishly spontaneous movement. "Welcome home, Mr. Craig. I'm new here, but I've read and heard all about you and seen you in films." He pumped Craig's fingers. "Mr. Zinneman will want to know about this. And Miss Wilson will want to welcome you too." He called into the office, "Miss Wilson." An enormously obese young woman, with the sweet, friendly face of the resigned fat girl, waddled into view. "Miss Wilson, this is the famous film star, Mr. John James Craig, come to pay a visit to the home folks."

Miss Wilson melted into a warm, expansive smile and extended her hand. "Mr. Craig, we're honoured to have you with us and you're most welcome back to Huntsville. We'll put you in Number Seven. It's been aired recently and has a sitting-room. You will be wanting to have all your old friends up to visit you."

There was no doubting her sincerity and delight, and she padded up to the room with him, saying, "Of course, I wasn't born when you lived here, but my Dad, when he was alive, often spoke about you. He remembered you very well as a boy."

Then he was alone in the musty sitting-room with the red plush overstuffed couch and chairs, and the inevitable mezzotint of Whistler's mother, experiencing a sudden sharp and, in the light of his welcome, inexplicable regret that he had come.

He stood looking out over the dreary High Street. "Welcome home! Welcome back!" they had said, though they were both too young to have known him. Would there be others still living who would remember? And what was he to do if they did?

Craig could recall now, as clearly as if it had appeared only yesterday, the story of his life that had been serialized in a Hollywood fan magazine to celebrate his fantastic overnight success as the unregenerate beachcomber in "High Adventure." He saw again the double-page spread.

JOHN JAMES CRAIG'S LIFE OF HIGH ADVENTURE
Iowa Farm Boy, Circus Roustabout, Prizefighter,
Soldier of Fortune . . . BY FRANCINE DESMOND HARTE

The opening chapters were devoted to his birth and early life in Huntsville. The story had been in the barefoot-boy tradition so dearly loved by the public, and had included the humble farm, the

spinster school teacher he had harassed with his high-spirited, boyish pranks, the village bully he had bested one day in epic combat, and even a description of his brown-haired, brown-eyed sweetheart, Mary, from whom he had been inseparable until, when he was ten, his family had moved away from Huntsville.

And he was remembering, too, the painful episode of the strange girl, Francine Harte, who had written the series, using material, he supposed, supplied by the studio press department. She had come to his flat to interview him for the final chapters. She had been young, intense, avid, with slightly prominent hazel eyes, fox-coloured hair, and a supple figure. She had practically thrown herself at him.

It had been his first experience with the fruits of success in Hollywood. He had rejected her and in the end managed to get her out of the house. It was not until years later when she became a famous syndicated columnist that Craig realized what a deadly enemy he had made, for she never once overlooked an opportunity to harm him. Yet the story went in Hollywood that she had never ceased to be in love with him.

The drab High Street of the depressing—and depressed—little town matched Craig's mood, for he was aware—in spite of all his success—of what a gigantic failure his life had been. He thought of his two disastrous marriages, the first to Aline Sorrell, the heiress, and the second to Kyra Drail, then billed as "The Most Desirable Woman in Hollywood."

Aline had tried to run him on a leash like a tame poodle. His marriage to Kyra, the spoilt, greedy, ambitious actress, had been a hell of exploitation, clashing temperaments, and professional jealousies. The recent divorce had not been pleasant. The battle had left him drained of everything but contempt for himself and the rest of the human species. He glanced at his still untouched bag, wondering whether to see the adventure through or pay for a night's lodging and get out, when he was interrupted by a knock on the door.

The man who entered was taller than he and leaner, with a hawk's beak of a nose and semi-bald head fringed with greying hair. His eyes were shrewd but the wide mouth was not unfriendly. He said, "I'm Zinneman, of the Gazette."

Craig shook hands. But he was on his guard. There was something about the cut of Zinneman's jib that proclaimed him as something more than a country editor.

Zinneman was sizing up Craig, for his head was already full of schemes and ideas. He said, "I thought I'd have recognized you anywhere off the screen, but I wouldn't. You're . . ."

"I know," Craig concluded, "much smaller. Actually, I'm five-ten-and-a-half—and I strip well."

Zinneman said, "You wouldn't remember me. I moved from the east over twenty years ago and bought the paper. That was quite a while after you'd left. You've never been back here before, have you?" Then, studying Craig with a curious expression in

his clever eyes, he asked, " What made you come back now? "

Craig debated. There was something at once disturbing as well as likeable about the man. He decided to tell the truth. " Impulse," he replied. " The crossing-gates were down to let the express go by. While I was waiting, I saw the sign, *Huntsville*, and well, here I am. I'm going on in the morning—on my way to New York. I've got a personal appearance there at the end of the month."

Zinneman said, " Pity. We're having a big combined civic luncheon here, the day after tomorrow. There'll be quite a few old-timers there."

Craig asked, " People from the Gibson Packing Company, too? "

Zinneman threw back his head and laughed a noisy appreciative laugh. " I guess everybody tries to use you for bait, eh? How did you know? Of course. You saw my notice on the board."

He delved into his pocket and produced an old copy of the Gazette, creased and yellowed. He asked, " Did you ever see this special edition of the Gazette I got out after your life story appeared in that fan magazine? I sent you a copy . . ."

A sudden uneasiness gripped Craig. It was twenty years since he had seen it and a long time since he had looked at the clipping he had carried about with him in his wallet ever since. " No," he lied, " I don't see half of the stuff sent to me."

Zinneman spread out the newspaper. Staring out from the page was a photograph of Craig as he had looked twenty years ago in " High Adventure." It was surrounded by many other photographs, men, women, scenes, a stream, stores, a farmhouse. Zinneman, to augment Huntsville's claim to fame, had canvassed the old-timers for memories of its newly-famous citizen.

Beneath a photograph of a sharp-faced old woman identified as, *Zoe Petersham, 65, teacher Huntsville School, retiring this year.* Craig's swift glance took in the caption: *Miss Zoe Petersham remembers John James Craig well when he was a pupil at the school at Mill Crossing where she has been teacher for more than forty years. He was always up to some mischief, in and out of trouble like all boys.*

Craig's thin lips curled over the text covering the picture of a heavy-jowled, surly-looking man. *He didn't lick me fair and square, Luke Whipple says of his famous fight with Craig at Harper's barn.*

And then the photograph of the clear-eyed, sweet-faced girl gazing at him out of the page compelled him to look at her again. It was almost as though she had called to him. As before, it brought to him a sense of desolation, of worlds lost. And again, as he regarded her, the overpowering memory of his dream returned with fearful, nostalgic clarity. He wondered what Zinneman would say if he knew that the clipping he, Craig, carried in his wallet was a duplicate of this picture.

Craig re-read the caption now, *Mrs. Ralph Morgan*, the questioning subtitle, *Craig's boyhood sweetheart?* and then the accompanying story. *Neighbours agree that the boyhood sweetheart of John Craig could have been pretty Mary Ellis who lived not far from the Wiswell place which, according to old-timers, was farmed by the Craigs . . .*

Mrs. Hettie Craddock of Stiles Lane relates she often saw John carrying Mary's books to school. The Craigs moved away from Huntsville when Mary was about nine. Mary married Ralph Morgan. The couple are now living in Sioux City.

Zinneman was saying, " Look here. How about letting me take a picture of you and old Miss Petersham? She's nearly eighty-five now, but her mind is as clear as a bell. It would make a good story. She lives only a few minutes from here . . ."

Although Miss Petersham had retired from teaching for some twenty years, she still carried her head, thin nose, and gold-rimmed spectacles high as though perpetually looking over the front rows to see what was afoot at the back of the class. The room which Zinneman and Craig entered was as plain and severe as she.

Zinneman said, " Good afternoon, Miss Petersham. I have brought someone to visit you. This is John James Craig, who was one of your pupils many, many years ago."

" Eh, who? " The head and nose of the tall old lady in the straight-backed chair came up from her sewing and she peered over the lenses of her glasses. Her backbone was like a ramrod, her mouth thin, stern, uncompromising. The ramrod was still in her voice, too. " I remember a Johnny Craig. Always up to some kind of mischief."

Craig said, " How do you do, Miss Petersham." He felt suddenly subdued, small, ridiculous, almost as though his trousers had shrunk to knickerbockers, as though at any moment Miss Petersham might pick up a ruler and rap him smartly across the knuckles for inattention.

Miss Petersham's old eyes rested upon him. She spoke in a sere voice like the whispering of dried leaves on the pavement in autumn. " I am glad to see you, Johnny Craig. Have you done well in life? Have you remembered the precepts I taught you, *Put truth and honour before all else*, and *To thine own self be true*? I have always tried to give my pupils precepts by which they might live as well as learn." Craig's thoughts turned to the hundreds of youngsters always, in her eyes, up to some kind of mischief, who had passed through her hands and gone on to grow, bud, flower, and bloom while she remained behind, dry and arid as a winter-scorched weed, waiting now her time to die, forgotten.

He suddenly felt moved and overwhelmed with a wave of affection for this stern, good, aged woman who had devoted herself to teaching and instilling precepts into children by which they might be able later to weather the tempests of life. Hardly aware that he was doing so, Craig crossed the room quickly, knelt at old Miss Petersham's side, put his arm about her, and leaned his rough, leathery cheek against hers that felt like parchment.

The cry torn from Miss Petersham's throat was the ageless one of the lonely, neglected woman who has made her peace. " Ah no, no! Such kindness I cannot bear."

Nevertheless she suffered her cheek to remain against his and almost imperceptibly yielded to the pressure of his arm until a tear

spilt from her eyes and the flashlight of Zinneman's camera caused Craig to look up angrily and then rise shamefacedly to his feet. But he was thinking, How alike is all loneliness; one can steel oneself to anything save to the warmth of the touch of a friendly hand. And he thought again of the face of the girl in the newspaper cutting in his wallet.

Back in the hotel room Zinneman said, " Thanks. I'd better be getting back to the office." The editor's attention was taken by the copy of his special edition that still lay opened on the table. " Pity you aren't staying. There's another picture I should have liked to have taken. You and Mrs. Morgan."

Craig's head came up and he looked sharply at Zinneman. " Mary? Mrs. Morgan? I thought it said she was married and living in Sioux City." Zinneman's observant eye caught the odd flash of emotion that Craig could not conceal and his hopes rose.

He said, " Mary's husband died four years ago. They had no children. His widow returned here to live in the old Ellis house."

John James Craig said, " I see." But for the moment he did not, for his eyes were turned inwards to a kaleidoscope of women, faces, scents, textures of hair and skin, eyes and voices filled with passion. And of them all, there seemed only one that mattered, and that was the likeness that gazed out from the brittle page before him.

Suddenly he felt a powerful urge to climb into his car and drive, drive, drive, as though the devil were after him, to speed away until the tenacious memories of those who remembered his boyhood could no longer catch up with him.

But the girl in the photograph with the clear brow and wonderfully calm eyes seemed to say, " Stay, my love. Do not go, now that you have come back."

Craig said, " I've changed my mind. I'll stay for your luncheon."

Back in his office, Zinneman, his eyes burning with excitement, studied the picture he had taken and immediately rushed it by car to Des Moines where it went out by radio that night.

It appeared the next day in most of the morning papers, and brought a lump of nostalgia into the throat of every man or woman who had ever known a beloved teacher. Later, the photograph was to have far-reaching consequences for the two it had captured in an unguarded moment.

With each succeeding interview and picture the next day, Craig's feeling of deep depression increased. The indefatigable editor seemed intent upon using Craig to win the utmost publicity for Huntsville, and bring back prosperity to the town which had been left high and dry when the east-west highway was moved twelve miles north. If he was at all aware of the emotional impact such a voyage through the past might have upon Craig, he gave no sign and showed no mercy. Caught in the toils of the strings pulled by Zinneman, Craig posed for pictures, and was even made to visit the old Wiswell farm on the edge of town.

It was on the morning of the day of the Huntsville luncheon that

Zinneman took him to visit old, blind Mrs. Norton, who lived over the barber's shop. Craig was sure he had reached the end of his endurance, for she remembered his mother.

" She was so kind," Mrs. Norton told him, " so very kind. And I remember her voice was always so wonderful, soft and kind. I can just hear her voice in yours . . ."

Back in his hotel room, instead of changing, Craig began throwing things into his bag. Zinneman said, " If we get to the luncheon by 12.30 we'll be O.K."

Craig did not look up from his packing and merely said, " Forget it. I'm not going to the lunch."

Zinneman, taken by surprise, protested, " Look here, Craig, isn't it a little late to—"

" I said forget it. I'm not going." The edge on Craig's voice as well as the baleful glare in the clouded, light blue eyes startled the editor. For a moment they duelled wordlessly with glances across the table, each taking the measure of the other. For each knew a secret and yet each lacked the key that could have unlocked all the long-sealed doors.

Zinneman was the first to drop his eyes. " If you say so." Then he added, " Too bad. I'd arranged in the afternoon for you to go over and pay a visit to Mary Ellis Morgan. I telephoned her this morning."

The gorge of anger rose dangerously in Craig. " And who the hell asked you to do that? "

" No one. It was my idea. I asked whether I might bring you out this afternoon." Then the tall editor courageously moved to the attack. " It's because of her you came to stay here, isn't it? "

The emotional beating Craig had suffered seemed suddenly to drain strength and truculence from him. And besides, Zinneman had spoken the truth. He had to know. Was she the far-off love of his dreams, a part of this nightmare that had slowly been enveloping him ever since he had taken the fatal step of coming to Huntsville? He asked Zinneman, " And what was Mrs. Morgan's reaction to that piece of offensive busybodying? "

" She told me to bring you over any time this afternoon."

Craig's deep sigh broke the silence that followed. He had been afraid that this was what Zinneman might say. He felt sick. But he could not leave without being sure. He said, " If I stay and come to your luncheon, you may regret it. Gibson's coming, isn't he? "

" Gibson's son. The old man couldn't make it." Zinneman added quietly, " I'll take that chance."

The chairman of the Huntsville civic luncheon finished his fulsome introduction: " This world-famous actor, born in our midst, who has brought such renown to our humble little community, is our very honoured guest."

Craig rose to speak. He hated the ugly room, the long tables bearing the dregs of the bad lunch, the moon faces of the men

turned expectantly towards him, the banners hanging limply by the potted palms. There was the smell of cheap cigars and men's old, too-long-worn clothing in the stale air.

He had taken an instant dislike also to Bennett Gibson, representing the packing company. His tie was too correctly tied, his hair too precisely combed, his pocket handkerchief too carefully folded, his nose carried just that much too high.

Craig supposed he ought to begin by telling them a funny story and was turning over in his mind some of the cleaner ones, when he was saved further cerebration by the sudden rising to his feet at the end table of a big barrel of a man, heavy jowled with hostile eyes and truculent manner, who shouted, "Ah, siddown. You're nothing but a phoney film actor." And then he added, "My name, in case you might have forgotten, is Luke Whipple."

A gleam came into Craig's light eyes. He remembered the man, self-accused in Zinneman's edition as a bully who had never outgrown it, still smarting under a licking he had received as a boy. He regarded Whipple with almost friendly interest. "Do you think so?" he said amiably. "I know several directors and producers who would agree with you. However, at the moment, if you don't mind—"

The big man, half a head taller than Craig, stood, his head thrust forward with belligerence.

"You're not only a dud actor; you're a lousy fighter. You couldn't fight your way out of a paper bag."

From all quarters of the room arose cries: "Sit down, Luke! Shut up. Pipe down, Luke."

Whipple paid no heed. He sneered at Craig, "Maybe you licked me once, but you can't do it again."

Craig said quietly, "Oh yes, I can."

Whipple laughed unpleasantly. "Would you like to step outside, chorus boy?"

Craig looked down at his plate for a moment. For the first time he felt as though he might win relief—through sheer physical action—from the welter of fears, disgust, memories, and emotions to which he had been prey ever since he had arrived in Huntsville. He raised his head. "Outside has juvenile implications that don't appeal to me. What about here?" There was a gasp, a rustle, and movement of chairs.

Craig flipped a spoon into a double somersault and caught it. "This is a private gathering, I take it. You gentlemen are all Americans brought up in the American way of settling differences. I could agree with our friend Luke here that I am a lousy actor and a mediocre fighter, but the chorus boy business wants debating."

He looked over at Zinneman whose face was a study. Bennett Gibson rose and said, "Do I understand you are proposing to fight here? That would be intolerable."

Craig regarded him coldly and said, "Shut up, Gibson. You're a guest here, too. I'm leaving it to the boys."

Craig could almost smell the electric change in the atmosphere.

The room suddenly bristled with masculine eagerness to witness a fight.

Zinneman sighed, picked up his camera and flash gun with a gleam of pure delight in his eyes.

The chairman half rose, opening his mouth, but was caught in mid air by, " Siddown, and let 'em have it out," from the rear of the room. He hesitated, looking round for non-existent support, and was lost.

Craig moved smoothly round the tables, peeling off clothes as he went. He said, " All right, Luke, let's have a try. If you wind up on the deck I'm still the world's biggest ham, but we cancel out that chorus-boy crack. Is that all right? "

Whipple came forward pulling off his coat and shirt. He was suddenly selfconscious and deeply embarrassed. It was one thing to rough and tumble and slug it out at the back of a building and quite another to stand half naked in the centre of the floor of the hotel room before his fellow townsmen.

Craig was looking happy and relaxed for the first time since he had arrived, and flexed his shoulders smoothly. He had told the truth when he had said he stripped well.

" O.K., Luke," he said pleasantly. " Put up your hands and let's go." And gliding in easily and smoothly he struck the first blow, a left hook to the temple.

Thereafter it was a swift, scientific slaughter that was over with merciful speed as Craig moved about his slow, heavy opponent whipping in short, sharp punches with a machine-gunner's rapidity and a rifleman's accuracy. For the better part of a minute there was no sound but the meaty thud of Craig's fists and Whipple's gasps and grunts. Then Craig levelled one to the left side of Whipple's jaw, and the big man crashed heavily to the floor and remained there as Zinneman's flash gun went off.

Craig did not even bother to look at him, but took his clothes and started back to his table, examining the middle knuckle of his right hand which was already swelling, and shaking his head regretfully. " Same damn one," he murmured.

He was nearly dressed when he reached the speaker's place. Zinneman had picked up a jug of water and doused it over Whipple, who stirred, rolled over, and got to one knee, shaking his head.

Craig adjusted his tie and donned his jacket. Bennett Gibson, pale and affronted, said, " I am leaving."

Craig favoured him with his frosty smile. " Stayed to see the fun though, didn't you? Why go now? "

Then, resuming his place before the microphone, the actor gave his spoon the double flip again, and asked, " All right, Luke? " The beaten man had climbed to his feet.

Whipple waved at him in an odd, friendly sort of way and said, " O.K., John." His legs still trembling, he wiped the blood from his nose and mouth with a napkin. Then slowly, as though forcing himself against the invisible obstacles created by his inner struggles, he walked the length of the floor.

Near the head table he turned and faced the audience. "I've got something to say," he began haltingly. "I'm a rotter—a prize fraud. I guess you all read about the fight that I once had with—our famous guest here. Well, I don't remember much about it except that I got a darned good licking, and when it was over I wouldn't shake hands."

The room was breathlessly silent. The big man fumbled for words for a moment. "Maybe you don't know that you can think a hell of a lot of things while you're getting beaten up by—" he managed a sheepish, split-lipped grin—"by an expert who ain't no chorus boy." He turned to Craig. "Will you shake hands with me, Johnny?"

Craig said, "You're damned right, I will," and stuck out his hard and battered hand. Then the room rocked with cheers as the two men gripped and, the next instant, Whipple was surrounded.

Craig was forgotten and ignored as the men rushed to Whipple to tell him they understood what it had cost him to come forward and say what he did. The big man stood in the centre of it, blood dripping from the cut over one eye, grinning with delight at being one with his community and fellows.

At the height of the excitement, Craig caught Zinneman's eye and nodded. Together they quietly left the room. Outside Craig said, "If you use the shot you made of that, I'll kill you."

Zinneman lied, "I wasn't going to. I just thought you might like it for your scrapbook." He performed the operation with the camera and handed the print over. Craig studied it for a moment, then tore it into small pieces.

He said, "I told you you'd regret it if I came."

Zinneman grinned, "It was worth it. I don't know whether we could stand a stuffed shirt like that running a factory round here anyway. What time do you want to drive out to Mary Morgan's?"

Craig stared at him coldly. For the moment, he had forgotten. Well, he had made a mess of things. He might as well finish the job. "In about an hour," he said. "Alone! You're just a little too handy with that camera to suit me, my friend."

Zinneman sighed. Then he said wistfully, "Well, let me know how things turn out. Remember, my besetting sin and profession is curiosity." Craig did not reply.

Guiding his car out of Huntsville, following the directions given him by Zinneman, Craig knew that although he had endured punishment in the prize-ring, the manifold perils of nature in sea, jungle, and desert, as well as the hazards of war, he had never come so close to destruction as now, when he was daring to approach a dream and capture it. It seemed as though in the brief time since he had come to Huntsville, all his hopes had been centred on this woman.

He paused at the crossroads. At the far end of the lane leading off from it he saw the green-shuttered, white farmhouse, with its accompanying plump red barns half concealed by clumps of century-old willows. Why not turn back and leave her as she had been,

beautiful and unattainable, his refuge for ever? He answered himself by stubbornly pulling the wheel of the car towards the lane.

Inside the house, Mary Ellis Morgan heard the approaching car and waited with trepidation which heightened her colour. Time had only confirmed the warmth and calm of her beauty. Her fine, dark eyes still mirrored the gravity, sweetness, and clarity of spirit in which a man might find completion and shelter for ever. She had kept her youthful figure which maturity had enriched.

Through the window she saw now that Craig was alone and she wished she had not let him come.

She heard the door of his car slam, his quick light footsteps, and then the ringing of the doorbell. She summoned her courage and her resolve and opened the door.

They stood facing one another across the threshold, these two strangely assorted people, the woman who had led a life of innocence and the man who had walked in wickedness but who had treasured the picture—the image of her—for so long. And the words that Mary Ellis Morgan had meant to speak would not come to her lips. For she had not expected such a harrowed, beaten person, one upon whom success sat as such an empty achievement, who looked so lonely and abandoned and whose hungry, searching gaze penetrated to her heart and touched her deeply.

Craig, the possessive man, the fighter, the taker, stood tongue-tied and spellbound in the presence of his dream realized—this woman with the shining spirit, the compassionate brow set off by her heavy brown hair, the depth of tenderness revealed in the dark eyes.

And thus startled and bemused, they could only speak to one another across a gulf and at cross purposes. Craig spoke first. His words came slowly as though he were addressing her out of another world and another era.

He said slowly, " Hullo, Mary."

Mary extended her hand to him and replied, " John—it is good that you have come back." It was not at all what she had meant to say, but she felt suddenly as though she could not bear to disappoint him.

Craig took the hand she extended in his own ice-cold hand. He thought his heart would break at her welcome, and then she asked, " Have I changed much? "

He brought himself to say, " No, Mary."

The ache of grief and disappointment, the sense of loss and desolation, were even greater than he had expected. It communicated itself to her and moved her heart to unfold to him as it might to a child. She said, " Won't you come in, John? There must be so many things you have to tell me. You have become so famous."

He followed her inside. Somewhere, both time and place or perhaps the universe itself had slipped a cog.

They went into the comfortable living-room that breathed the atmosphere of peace and tranquillity for which he longed. But the

scene and the mood were still wrong and they sat upon the edges of a chair and sofa, apart from one another, in curiously stilted attitudes like those seen in old daguerrotypes. Craig, his knotty hands with the swollen knuckle folded in his lap, studied her with his misery-laden, pale eyes.

Mary, too, sat with her hands in her lap, very erect and proper. But she was wishing to hold his head to her breast. Instead she said, " You have never been back here before? I returned myself only a few years ago, after my husband died."

" No, Mary."

" Things have not changed much here."

" Do they ever really change? It is we who alter."

What was it he wanted? What was he trying to tell her? What was the heartbreaking purpose of it all?

She continued to speak as though she were reading a part that had been written for her. " Tell me, how do you remember me, John? "

Now pictures leapt to his mind, for unknowing, she had triggered the dream, the old, old dream . . .

" How do I remember you, Mary? It was a long time ago. There was a meadow and a stream. The meadow was deep in wild flowers; a wind rippled the stream."

It had become quite still in the room. A canary in a cage by the yellow chintz curtains trilled loudly for an instant and then hushed.

" In the meadow," Craig continued, his pale eyes no longer seeing for they were turned inwards towards his dream, " a child, a little girl stood waiting for me. She had brown hair braided down her back and deep, dark, grave eyes. And I remember the smell of the sunlight on her hair, and the warm fresh cotton of her pinafore, and it has haunted me ever since. And she smelt of bread and butter, and of jam. Because this was so, I wished to cry; I do not know why, but perhaps it was because she was so young and deeply touching . . .

" And then later," he continued, " her hair was braided about her head. She was taller and older, but her eyes were just as deep and dark and grave, and when I held out my arms to her she came close to me and laid her cheek to mine. And when I touched my lips to hers I sank into such sweetness that . . ."

She had to stop him! Another instant, and she would have been lost, swept into the maelstrom in which she wished to drown. For they were both on their feet now, facing one another, and that which trembled between them and his hunger for her made her weak and dizzy, until in the last moment, out of the panic engendered by her imminent surrender to this stranger, she remembered who she was, but above all who *he* was, and why she had sent for him.

She cried, " No, no. Stop! I order you to stop. Do not look so surprised, Mr. Craig. I am not fooled by you, and never have been for a single instant. I was born here in this house, more than

forty years ago. I was brought up and went to school here as a child.

"You are not one of the Craigs who lived here once. You were not born here. You never lived here as a boy. You are a fraud and a cheat, Mr. Craig!" And then inconsequentially, but movingly, she cried, "Oh, why, why did you do it? Aren't you ashamed, Mr. Craig, to speak this way to me when you have never laid eyes on me before?"

"That's right," Craig said, "I was not born and brought up here. I have never been here before. I am a fraud and a cheat."

Mary Morgan, her villain unmasked, felt as though she had struck a child.

They faced one another now, the man and the woman so strangely brought together, each with a sense of loss—words spoken, actions taken that could never be unsaid or undone.

Although his cynicism filled him with contempt when he realized how easily these Huntsville people had deluded themselves simply to shine a little in the reflected glory of a film star, nevertheless the illusion they had created had gripped him until there had been moments when the fantasy of a happy boyhood had become more real than truth itself.

The illusion had been building ever since he had stepped into the hotel and the young clerk had said, *Welcome home;* the illusion fostered by Zinneman for his own reasons, and the people of Huntsville for theirs; the illusion that he had a home, that he belonged.

Why had Mary first listened to him, sharing his dream, only to destroy it? He knew now that a man must have some illusion left him or die, even one whose profession it was to create a world of illusion for others.

Craig said, "But it is not true that I have never laid eyes on you before."

From his wallet he extracted the press cutting with the photograph of the young Mary Ellis and gave it to her.

"I first saw this twenty years ago," he said. "I have carried it with me always, ever since."

Mary looked up from the yellowed clipping into Craig's eyes, trying to realize the import of his words. "I don't understand . . ."

Craig went to her then, and took her in his arms, forcefully, as though by sheer vehemence he could recapture what had been between them at first and now was lost.

"I've loved you, cherished my dream of you, ever since that first glimpse of your picture. I've searched for you, been in love with you—all my life."

He was oblivious of the fact that it was too soon, that he was shocking and frightening her. He could not realize the gulf that, in her eyes, his profession created between them.

"What difference can anything make, now that at last I have found you?" he cried in desperation. "All my dream of you could

have been true, had I been born here. I should have gone to school with you. You would have been my childhood sweetheart. I should have walked you home, carried your books, fought your battles. And instead of my dream there would have been you in the meadow with the sun on your hair, your cheek against mine."

Their course was unalterably set now towards misunderstanding. The force, the urgency of his grip clouded all that she had felt about him before. She believed he was trying to make a quick conquest.

Anger lent her strength; she disengaged herself from his grasp. " Mr. Craig, is this one of your screen performances? I suggest you go back to your film world, where you are able to seduce girls with a word or a look. Did you really believe you could come here as a stranger, make love to me, and I would surrender? "

" Surrender? " Craig echoed desperately. " But it is I who am surrendering to you—such a thing I have never done before."

His words brought home to her vividly how close she herself had been to capitulation a few minutes earlier. To deny the memory, to appease her own sense of shame, she again took refuge in unleashing her anger. " If you do not leave Huntsville at once, Mr. Craig, I shall tell Zinneman and everyone else in this place that you are an impostor."

Her words completed the destruction of the boy who had once dreamt a dream and pursued it secretly to his undoing. A returning tide of bitterness and cynicism altered the face of John James Craig, drained it of youth, accented lines of hardness and savagery.

He did not attempt to touch her again, but walked slowly to the door where he turned to Mary and said in a voice that had roughened to a rasp, " Since you're going to tell the truth, you might as well have the whole truth, and put yourself and this rotten town right into the headlines. My real name is Harry Jarotin. I was born in the Polish section of Hamtramck outside Detroit. My father was killed in a drunken brawl when I was four. My mother died when I was nine. She went with men. Some people took me in at the tenement where we lived but my home was in the streets of Hamtramck. When I was twelve I was sent to a reformatory. I ran away when I was fifteen and soon found out what you could get away with inside the law . . . I changed my name and shipped off to sea."

He paused for a moment, his eyes pale, cloudy, and hostile, his mouth thin and hard, the chin truculent. His expression was again that of the outsider against whom every man's hand had turned.

" It would make a nice story for the press," he continued, " John James Craig—America's barefoot boy, the delinquent son of a drunken immigrant and a cheap prostitute. Harry Jarotin's the name! " He turned and went out. Mary heard the frantic revving of the engine, and the shriek of tyres as the car wrenched away.

Zinneman was sitting coiled round his typewriter in the single office of the Gazette, which was also studio, composing-room, and

laboratory, rubbing his long chin and contemplating a three-page telegram from New York, when he heard the car. He looked out and saw Craig; his suitcase next to him on the seat. The expression on the actor's face was not pleasant.

Zinneman quickly opened his desk and produced a bottle and two glasses. When Craig came in, he said, " Just in time to join me in a drink. Help yourself."

Craig poured himself a stiff one and stood leaning against the photocopyer, regarding Zinneman sourly before he drank it off, set the glass down, and said, " Thanks. I'm getting out."

Zinneman nodded. " I gather the visit to Mrs. Morgan was not an unmitigated success."

" Did you expect it to be? " Craig asked.

" I don't know," Zinneman admitted cheerfully.

" Why did you send me there? "

" Why did you go? " Before Craig could reply, Zinneman answered the actor's question, " I thought you two might get to like one another."

Craig glowered at him. " Mrs. Morgan told me I was a cheat and a swindler who had been taking advantage of the innocent natives, and asked me to leave her house. She ought to be along shortly to give you the story." He paused to pour himself another drink, drank half of it, and regarded Zinneman balefully over the edge of the glass. " I filled her in on a little past history I thought you might find interesting."

" Do you mean the Hamtramck stuff? " Zinneman looked guileless.

" What the hell do *you* know about that? "

" Sorry," Zinneman replied. " Long arm of coincidence. I was City Editor, Hamtramck Beacon, for ten years. *Those* ten years. I told you I had worked in the east before I retired and bought this paper. East of here, that is—"

" So you knew from the very beginning, the day you came up to my hotel, that I'd never been here before."

" I've known ever since I saw your first film, and that life story of yours came out. By the way, where did the lady who wrote that sob-stuff about you get her information on Huntsville? It was astonishingly accurate, you know—apart from the fact that you'd never set foot in the place. And there once was a Craig family living here. They moved away in 1920."

Craig shrugged. " What made you take this town for a ride then, getting out that special edition? "

" Oh," said Zinneman, " I'm not exactly a sterling character. The week that magazine came out, I met an old chap—he's dead now—with a copy under his arm. ' I always said Johnny Craig would make good,' he told me, ' I remember him like it was yesterday. That boy always had a lot of push and go.' I began to wonder just how many others would ' remember ' you." Zinneman nodded towards the framed copy of the special edition on the wall. " I went round asking leading questions and using suggestion.

You know the result." He grinned. "The town was just going down for the third time when you turned up a few days ago—like an answer to prayer. A real shot in the arm. So I used you."

He poured himself a modest drink, and another for Craig, and lifted his glass. "Well, here's luck to us." He took a sip, set the glass down, and said, "You can't leave here now."

The cold impudence of the statement caught Craig in mid drink and he choked, spilling some of the whisky.

"What the hell makes you think I can't?"

"This," Zinneman said, and tossed over two of the three pages of a telegram, turning the third face down on his desk. "It's from Morrow Burgess, the television producer. You've seen his show. Biggest audience in the country."

Craig read, *Your photo Craig and Miss Petersham has touched all hearts in U.S. including ours. Will do immediate spot show Saturday glorifying country-heroine school teacher. Sponsor will present cheque to build new Petersham School in her honour, plus personal bonus contingent Craig also there. His presence vital to show. Spare no expense. Round up all ex-pupils two hundred mile radius. Fill auditorium to pay her tribute. From then on cameras will tell story.*

Craig laughed a short, ugly laugh and tossed the sheets back on the desk.

"Isn't that nice," he said. "Except that Uncle Craigie will be a couple of thousand miles away from here."

Zinneman said, "You can't go. It was you who created the Petersham story with that gesture of yours—probably the only generous and unselfish one you ever made. Her loneliness, her tears, made a whole nation remember the teachers they had forgotten, who sacrifice their lives, thankless and unhonoured. Now an entire nation wants to give Miss Petersham its love and gratitude. Will you deny this to a lonely old woman whose life is drawing to a close?"

Craig studied Zinneman. His tight mouth broke into a grin that was not reflected in his eyes. "You know, you're really wonderful," he said. "For a moment you took me in—I began to believe you. You want that new company to come to Huntsville awfully badly, don't you?"

Zinneman never even blinked. "Yes," he replied evenly, "I do. Nevertheless, what I said about Miss Petersham is true."

Craig laughed and gestured towards the third sheet of the wire face down on the desk. "What's your own rake-off for setting up this television show for Burgess? I understand they pay well."

In the same tone and without taking his direct gaze from Craig's face, Zinneman replied, "Ten thousand dollars."

Craig said, "That's a lot of money to lose. Well, so long."

"Sit down," Zinneman said. "It's the little people who pay your salary at the box-office. People who know the difference between right and wrong. You aren't going to come out of it very well when it gets around that you lost your home town the chance to get a new school, and walked out on the old girl."

Craig threw back his head and laughed loudly and mirthlessly. "That's better," he said. "That's more like my old pal."

The two men were watching each other warily now. Zinneman said, "You'll stay then?"

Craig reflected for a moment. In his mouth was the bitter taste of the last days. He thought of the way Zinneman had used him, and the manner in which Mary Morgan had shown him the door. At last he said, "If you put it that way, I'll stay."

Alf Zinneman looked through the opaque windows of Craig's anger-clouded eyes, pierced them momentarily, and read what lay behind. "You're going to blow the gaff during the show," he said, and suddenly looked older and greyer.

Craig's gaze was insolent. "You're a newspaperman, you like a good story, don't you? I understand they like nothing better than a good, red-hot, unexpected ending to those shows. You can wire Burgess I'll be there."

Zinneman licked dry lips. "Oh," he said, "I sent that wire two hours ago."

On the Saturday afternoon before the evening show, Craig, Zinneman, and Morrow Burgess were lunching together, when the hotel clerk brought to their table the strange, elegant woman who had planed, trained, and driven fifteen hundred miles to Huntsville. Burgess, an intense, nervous, chain-smoking man with a shock of limp black hair, pale skin, and extraordinarily sensitive and intelligent eyes, was discussing final details of the show.

All three men rose. Craig did not speak, but Burgess said, "Nice of you to come over for the show, Francine." He was used to reporters moving in his wake to catch sparks from the drama of his impromptu, unrehearsed broadcasts.

The woman had a nerve—a raw, quivering nerve, Zinneman decided. He took an instant dislike to her. She was tall, angular, chic, and dynamic, with dark red hair, thin nose, and slightly prominent hazel eyes. Paris, New York, Rome, Hollywood were written all over her from the tips of her elegant Italian shoes to the shade of polish on her over-long, curved fingernails, and the lipstick on the cruel, passionate mouth. The perfect line of her hair-style was set off by a daring purple and orange hat.

She leaned over and pecked Craig's cheek. "John, how sweet to see you."

Craig's face remained expressionless. He said, "Alf Zinneman, editor of the local paper, Francine Harte, of the syndicate. You two ought to have much in common." Then he added, "Miss Harte was my first biographer, many years ago."

Francine acknowledged the introduction and then said to Zinneman brightly, "Didn't you know? I wrote the original script. I just had to come here to see how it all turns out."

She made the editor shudder inwardly. Innocent as her words were they yet seemed to be full of menace.

Francine said, "John dear, if you've finished your lunch, why

don't you take me for a drive and show me something of your charming little home town?" Her beautifully-gloved hand was on his arm; skilfully and efficiently she pried him loose from the others.

Craig, his gnarled face still expressionless, said to the others, "Be seeing you," and went out in her wake.

Zinneman shuddered, and said, "So that's Francine Harte . . ."

"*Born in Paris, educated in Switzerland, and flew out to Hollywood on a broomstick,*" Burgess commented. "At least that's the impression she likes to give."

Zinneman got up, said to Burgess, "Well, we're all set. I'll be seeing you later," and hurried off to his office . . .

Craig anchored the car with the handbrake alongside a field of green cornstalks, lit a cigarette without offering his companion one, looked at her insolently, and asked, "Well, what do you want?"

"You," Francine replied, leaning over and kissing him on the mouth. For a moment Craig held her in his arms. Then he drew away from her, and said coolly, "Sorry, Francine, still no sale," and resumed his cigarette.

She masked her fury and disappointment, asking lightly, "Who's the girl, John? John James Craig doesn't hang around a town like Huntsville unless there's a girl involved. Who did you find? You always did have queer tastes in women."

Craig knew she wanted to be struck, and studiously controlled himself.

"John, I'm still in love with you. I've never been out of love with you since the first time I saw you—and that's a long time ago. I've tried everything, including marriage and divorce, and it's still you."

Craig asked, "What can I do about it?"

Francine was looking at him directly and there was a glitter in her eyes. "You could do worse than to marry me, John. We're *both free. We're both successful. We've arrived. We don't have* to compete with one another."

Craig remained silent, smoking. She thought he was considering her proposal. If he did not love her, at least he was a cold and calculating devil about business and might see the value of an alliance with her.

She said, "You're a man of the world and need a woman of the world with you. There is much about living I could teach you, John—London, Rome, Paris. I was born in Paris. I could lay Paris at your feet. In Paris are the most beautiful and exciting women in the world. And if you wanted them I'd—"

"—get them for me," Craig concluded for her. "No thanks. The answer is still, no."

She reached over, took his cigarette away from him, smoked it a moment, and then said, "Aren't you being rather foolish, John?"

"No. You've done me all the damage you could in your gossip column through the years, and I'm still at the top."

"Do you think that is all the harm I can do you?"

He said, " I'll bet you have something really loathsome up your sleeve."

" John, just why won't you marry me? "

He replied conversationally and unemotionally, " Well, as you have asked for it, I'll give it to you straight. I just don't like you, or anything about you. I never have and I never will."

Francine Harte smiled a bitter smile, and her age suddenly showed horribly at the corners of her mouth and in the cords of her neck. She flicked the cigarette into the field. " Let's go back to town."

He eased the car into the road. She spoke just once more. " Remember, when it happens you have only yourself to blame."

As he neared the outskirts of Huntsville, Craig thought his heart had never been so heavy, nor his yearning so poignant and hopeless for the dream he had so foolishly destroyed.

Huntsville's memorable television show was drawing to a close, and tension was mounting as Morrow Burgess, sitting on the stage, manipulated his cameras via switches from a console-keyboard, like a virtuoso, cutting them in and out with a touch of his fingers as they probed into the hearts and lives of the grown pupils of old Miss Zoe Petersham.

The speeches and the award for the building of the new Petersham School had been made, and for the last fifteen minutes Morrow Burgess had been selecting and interviewing members of the audience, chosen apparently at random.

" Will you identify yourself, please, madam? "

A worn woman with a sweet mouth rose nervously. " My name is Myra Norton Graham."

" Where were you born, Myra Norton Graham? "

" Here in Huntsville on the old Norton farm. I went to the Mill Crossing School and Miss Petersham was my first teacher."

Then, proud and erect at the lectern in mid stage, Miss Petersham took over. She was attired in a black dress with high white collar, which, with her silvery hair, framed her face and her lively, intelligent eyes behind the gold-rimmed spectacles. She held a long ruler in her hand as in the old days and looked out across the hall into the faces that were her memories.

She said, " I remember you, Myra Norton. You were always giggling. Well, Myra, have you made something of your life? Have you lived by the precepts I taught you? "

The voice of the woman trembled as she replied, " I tried. Oh, Miss Petersham, I have tried. And I have brought up three children. You gave them all their first lessons."

Miss Petersham quoted a favourite precept: *In great things to have tried is enough.*

John Craig sat in the second row between old, blind Mrs. Norton, who " remembered " his mother, and Luke Whipple. He wondered whether it had been Zinneman, the puppet master, who had arranged the seating. Craig could think of nothing but the wording

of his revelation, and of the horror of his need to make it, when in due course it would be his turn to speak.

"Will you identify yourself, please, madam?"

"My name is Mary Ellis Morgan." Craig looked up sharply. His heart felt as though it were caught in a vice. Mary was on her feet across the aisle from him. "I was born on the Ellis farm here in Huntsville, and went to the school taught by Miss Petersham."

The old teacher looked down at her across the years. "I remember you, Mary. You were always whispering with the boys."

There was a laugh. Burgess moved quickly in over the top of it with a question: "Was John Craig one of them?" The laugh was hushed. The cyclops eyes of the cameras peered into the strained faces of Mary Morgan and John Craig. The producer continued, "Editor Zinneman once hazarded a guess that you were the boyhood sweetheart of John Craig, Mrs. Morgan. Was there any truth in that guess?"

It came to Craig almost as a relief that it would no longer be necessary for him to take his revenge; Mary Morgan would do it for him. She would say, "I have never before laid eyes on Mr. Craig. He is not that Craig who once lived here. He is an impostor and a cheat."

Burgess manipulated a split-screen device and the vast television audience saw in close-up the pale eyes and hard mouth of Craig, the frightened eyes of Mary Morgan.

At last she replied. "Yes," she said, so softly the first time that only the sensitive microphones picked it up.

"Yes," she repeated more clearly, "it was true."

"Could you tell us something about those days?"

"They were schooldays like any others in childhood." Her voice was strong and undaunted now. "Sometimes he carried my books for me; we sat next to one another in school and on picnics and hay-rides. And I remember once when I was a very little girl we were in a meadow filled with sunshine and flowers. He held a buttercup to my chin and said that I liked butter.. Together we picked buttercups. When our bunches were so large that we could hardly hold them he tied them with grass, took my hand, and we went home."

For an instant Craig's heart had leapt. Then he noted the fond gaze Mary turned upon the figure of Miss Petersham and was certain that it was for her sake alone that Mary had spared him. The spasm of anger that seized him reminded him that he had no such inhibitions.

"Sir, will you be so good as to identify yourself?"

Craig, aware that Burgess was addressing him at last, rose slowly to his feet. The eavesdropping microphones and prying cameras swooped on him from all quarters. "My name is John James Craig."

"And where were you born, Mr. Craig?"

He stood there silently and did not reply. If he could say what he wanted to, the town that had remembered would be destroyed . . .

I was born Harry Jarotin, in the slums of Hamtramck. My father was a drunk, my mother a prostitute. I went to school in the streets of Hamtramck where I learnt to be tough, ruthless, dirty, contemptible . . . But the words would not come. He stood as though transfixed and his eyes found those of Miss Zoe Petersham who he had once held in his arms and whose tears he had felt on his cheek.

Craig became aware of the fearful gap of silence before the waiting microphones and lenses. He, Craig, the actor, the professional, was standing before them all, his lines forgotten; unable to speak a word.

Then he felt his hand taken. He looked down in surprise. It was old Mrs. Norton. She turned her sightless face up to his and said, " Now don't you be nervous, lad. Just you speak up. Don't forget, you're one of us."

The microphone caught and relayed the soft, sweet voice of courage. Next a zooming camera caught Luke Whipple standing up. The big, dour man said, " My name is Luke Whipple, and I'm here to say that this is the best fellow in the world and he was born here." He gave Craig a clout on the back. " Tell 'em, boy. We're all proud of you."

It set off the most curious outpouring of love. It was as though the entire audience, Huntsvillers all, guessed that Craig was caught in the throes of some kind of crucial struggle and could not speak. Spontaneously they covered his lapse by rising to cheer and applaud him as he had never before been applauded and cheered.

This was no illusion: Craig knew now that he belonged. He was in trouble; they were standing by. Zinneman too was on his feet in the audience, his fist raised in an odd gesture of affection and encouragement.

The arc lights refracted from something that glittered in the eyes of John Craig as he held up one hand, and the gesture cut all the sound from more than five hundred throats as though technicians had thrown a switch. The silence seemed louder and more pregnant than the shouting. Into the middle of it Craig spoke.

" I was born down on the old Wiswell farm, out by Mill Run Creek. I went to our school, where Miss Petersham taught me—where, I'm afraid I gave her a lot of trouble."

Miss Petersham looked down at him over the rim of her spectacles and waved the long ruler like a wand. " I remember you, Johnny Craig," she said. " You were a tartar, always in and out of mischief."

Craig said, " I am sorry that I was a trouble to you, Miss Petersham. Will you forgive me? "

Miss Petersham replied, " I forgave you then. Boys will be boys." She made the old cliché sound like a benediction.

A harsh laugh rang through the hall, bitter, mocking, rattling the membranes of the microphone, shocking the ears of the listeners, winging its way over the air into the homes of the nation.

Francine Harte was standing up in the aisle in the sixth row.

The clashing colours of the purple and orange hat made her hair seem more horribly red. "Boys will be boys," she repeated in her acid voice. "I have something to add to that."

To Craig she appeared suddenly as one risen from the pit. He knew what she intended to do. He had made his peace with himself, with Mary Morgan, and the town. In an instant this monstrous woman would rend to shreds the fabric of his dream—the illusion which somehow had become necessary to them all. She was committed beyond recall to her destructive vengeance upon him. The circles beneath her protruding eyes were dark with blood, the eyes themselves filled with venom and hatred.

The mounting tension was approaching its climax. The penetrating voice of Morrow Burgess took command. "Will you identify yourself, please, madam?"

"My name is Francine Desmond Harte."

"Thank you, Miss Harte. Where were you born?"

"I was born in Paris, where my father was in the American Embassy. I returned to this country when I was—"

Miss Petersham looked down at the thin, vindictive woman with the aquiline nose and protruding eyes, and rapped sharply with her ruler on the side of the lectern.

"Eh?" she said. "Who did you say you were? Come nearer to me, girl, so that I may see you better."

Now occurred a strange and wordless duel of power between the tall, proud old teacher gazing down, as all her life she had been accustomed to, upon wayward and mischievous children, and the bitter, fashionable woman from another world who stared up at her in silence, blinking her eyes strangely as though what she saw was too bright.

Burgess, his nostrils flaring, signalled his cameras and they crept forward, silently stalking like one-eyed beasts through the jungle of equipment that littered the stage.

"Come along here, girl, and don't stand there fiddling like a ninny," Miss Petersham commanded—and was obeyed.

Slowly, with halting steps as though she was moving in spite of herself, the famous columnist came down the aisle until she was standing facing the lectern and the woman behind it.

"Now," Miss Petersham asked, "what did you say your name was?"

Fear edged the voice of the woman. "I told you once, and I'll tell you again. My name is Francine Harte. I wish to make a . . ."

"Fiddlesticks," Miss Petersham interrupted tartly. "Your name isn't Francine Harte, and never was. Your name is Elsie Billings, and you weren't born in Paris, either. You were born right here in Huntsville where your father was a good-for-nothing, shiftless wastrel."

The gasp from the audience shook the hall. Flushed crimson with fury, Francine Harte opened her mouth to speak, but the ruler rapped the side of the lectern smartly, almost as though it were being applied to knuckles.

"Do not speak until I give you leave," Miss Petersham reprimanded. "I remember you, Elsie Billings. You plagued me with your naughty ways and gave me a lot of worry."

Craig thought, So that is why Francine knew all about Huntsville and its people when she wrote my story. She substituted me for a real Craig who left here, switched me into the setting that was familiar to her. He found himself entertaining an emotion new to him. He pitied her, for she was a woman about to be destroyed.

Burgess was manipulating the switches of his screen control panel, like a musician at the organ console creating a fugue of drama.

"Well, Elsie Billings," Miss Petersham asked, "What have you done with your life? Why have you changed your name, and the colour of your hair? Were you ashamed of them? You have not remembered, To thine own self be true. You came to my school until your father went to gaol and you went away with relatives to the west. Have you lived by the precepts I taught you? Well, speak up now, Elsie!"

They were all witness then to the awful metamorphosis that took place. For the stern voice of the teacher at her lectern and the rattling clapper of her ruler seemed to release something deep down in the subconscious of the woman before her, a long-submerged conscience perhaps, which came welling up within her like some creature at long last making its escape, altering her posture, her face, her expression, even, so some said, turning her glowing hair from copper to dull, dun mouse. Through the trappings of the sophisticated woman of fashion, the chic, glamorous, elegant, soignée Francine Harte—now alien, lost, trembling—appeared little Elsie Billings of Huntsville. Elsie, the troublesome girl who could not look her old teacher in the face, now writhed and twisted in agony.

She bowed her head. The microphones began to pick up a dreadful sound, a low, hopeless sobbing that wells from a soul facing annihilation.

Incoherencies turned into words: "Oh, you have made me so ashamed—so deeply ashamed—I can never hold up my head again. Where can I go? What can I do?"

Suddenly, she put her hands before her face, turned, and fled up the aisle, her spiked heels clicking shockingly against the parquet, while the zooming cameras watched her, following her miserable flight until she passed through the doors and was lost to sight.

Then there occurred a spontaneous movement on the part of the grown children of Miss Petersham, and it coincided dramatically with the end of the broadcast, for, while they had not understood all that had happened, they knew that something evil had been vanquished. They came crowding down to the front of the hall, holding up flowers and gifts to their teacher, calling her name, sending great waves of love breaking over the tall, unbowed figure who stood there alone.

For the first time, a smile of happiness broke through the frosty countenance of Miss Petersham as she stood there, rising, as it were,

out of the sea of familiar and loving faces with affectionate hands and flowers uplifted to her.

A red-faced man with greying hair and an air of authority came over to where Craig was standing with Luke Whipple and Zinneman and began to pump their hands. " Greatest thing I ever saw," he said. " Gibson's will be proud to have a plant here. These are the kind of work-people we want."

Zinneman introduced him as Bennett Gibson. Craig liked him and wondered how it was that sons could be so different from their fathers. He asked Gibson, " What about that little affair between Luke and me? "

Gibson laughed. " Wish I'd been there to see it. Heard it was very scientific. My son is a stuffed shirt. Time may cure it."

Zinneman winked at Craig, whose eyes roved the crowd. He was looking for Mary Morgan, but she was nowhere to be seen.

The next morning he dropped in to say good-bye to the editor. He asked, " How did you engineer the Elsie Billings? "

Zinneman snorted. " I'm a hell of a newspaperman. As she had written the original story of your life she was the only other person who knew it was a fraud. And from the knowledge displayed of this town, she must have been here at some time. I spent the afternoon with the back files of the paper, and found a picture of a school picnic. She was there all right. There was no mistaking those eyes and that nose. I suppose she thought with that Paris build-up, the smart clothes, and the change of hair, no one here could possibly recognize or remember her."

Craig said, " But Miss Petersham—"

Zinneman looked down modestly. " I'll take the credit for that. I went to the old girl and put her wise. She is no fool, you know. At her age, her memory might confuse two boys, but her wits are as clear as a bell. She was proud of her day, proud and pleased as punch, and she wasn't going to have anyone spoiling it."

Craig gave the editor an admiring glance. " You don't leave much to chance, do you? "

Zinneman said, " I suppose you will really be leaving us now."

" If you're sure you're quite finished with me," Craig suggested.

Zinneman threw back his head and laughed. " Permission to depart granted." He paused, and added suddenly, " If I were you, I'd look in and say good-bye to Mary Morgan on your way out of town."

Craig felt a surge of the old anger and truculence. He rose stiffly and said, " If I were you, I'd learn to mind my own business."

Zinneman sighed. " It would be difficult to break a lifelong habit. I'm too old a newshound, I'm afraid, to be taught that trick." He rose and put out his hand, saying with a sudden warmth, simplicity, and endearing frankness that reached through to Craig, " Let's not part bad friends, John. We're a pair of stinkers, but we've been through a lot together."

Craig's smile broke through the forbidding front. He came back

and took the editor's hand firmly and thus they stood for a moment, like two small, bad boys grinning at one another's iniquity.

Mary Morgan heard Craig's car draw up. She came to the door when he rang, and again, as they had the first time, they stood regarding one another.

Craig said, " I came to say good-bye."

" I am glad you did, John. Won't you come in for a moment? "

With such set phrases they covered their turmoil and their love. They went in and sat down facing one another on the edge of their chairs, two strangers who would never more be strangers again.

For Mary Morgan saw him now as he was, a man, predatory, a fighter, standing on his own two feet in the jungle of the world, compounded of good and evil, cowardice and sublime courage, honesty and wickedness, as God had made men for His own good reasons, a living, vital creature consuming himself with passions, desires, ambitions, and yet who followed dreams. And she knew that she loved this hard, tough man.

The miracle to Craig was that sitting there opposite her looking into the calm, sweet eyes, all the fears and fantasies were drained away as though they had never existed. They were blotted out, overwhelmed by the love he felt for her.

He said, " Thank you for mending my dream." What amazed him was his sure knowledge of how he must proceed, as slowly as though they had just met for the first time, as though they did not know, beyond any shadow of doubt, that they were for one another heartsease, life, and love everlasting.

Mary replied, " It was never broken."

He asked, " Do you believe that two children might meet in a dream and that the boy would never forget the girl and would ever after search for her until he found her? "

" Yes," Mary said, " I do."

Craig rose, and she stood up too. He said, " May I come back, Mary? May I come back and stay until we have learnt to know one another, and will you then let me ask you to marry me? Will you let me come home to you, Mary? " Thus they stood for the moment facing one another as once before they had in anger, and now the woman's heart marvelled at the gift of his restraint.

She went to him and touched his rough, seared face with her gentle fingers and for an instant leaned her soft cheek against his, and it was as he had remembered it from the dream, only a thousand times more sweet. She said, " Come back to me, John."

He nodded and pressed his cheek against hers for yet another moment and with that was content. He went away, entered his car, and drove off down the lane, his heart singing.

★ ★ ★

UNSPOKEN THOUGHT

A woman, generally speaking, is generally speaking.

QUEEN of HEARTS

Paris haunts me like a regret!

ERNEST DOWSON

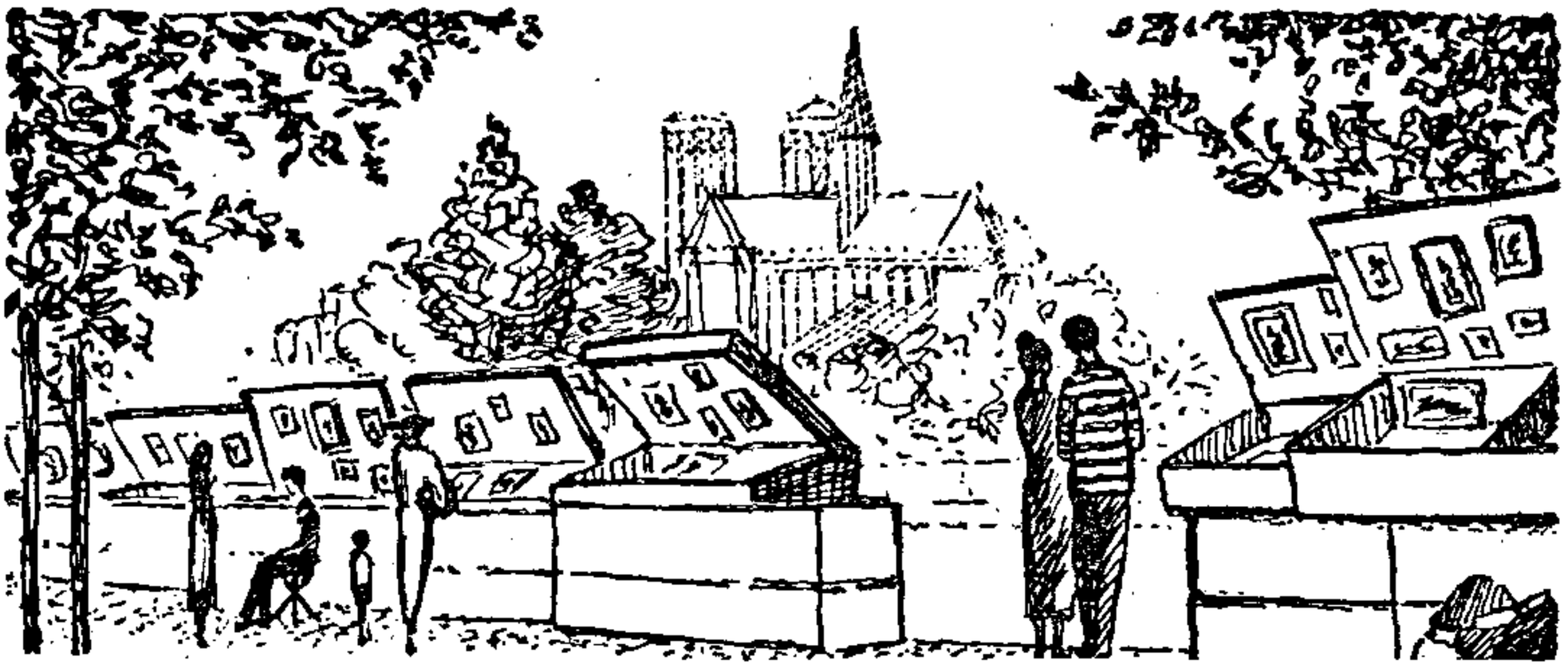
They crossed the river while Miss Fisher was speaking. In a sort of slow flash, Henrietta had her first open view of Paris—watery sky, wet light, light water, frigid, dark-inky buildings, spans of bridges, trees. This open light gash across Paris faded at each end. It was not exactly raining. Then, passing long grinding trams, their taxi darted uphill: the boulevard was wide, in summer there would be shade here. They swerved right, round the dark railings of a statuey leafless garden—"Look, Henrietta, the Luxembourg!"—then engaged in a complex of deep streets, fissures in the crazy gloomy height. Windows with strong grilles looked ready for an immediate attack (Henrietta had heard how much blood had been shed in Paris) doors had grim iron patterns across their glass; dust-grey shutters were almost all bolted fast . . . Miss Fisher, by reaching down for Henrietta's case, made it clear that they were arriving.

ELIZABETH BOWEN, *The House in Paris*

Sweet Memory

Christine, do you remember yet
Your room with scents and roses gay?
My garret—near the sky 'twas set—
The April hours, the nights of May?
The clear calm nights—the stars above
That whispered they were fairest seen
Through no cloud-veil? Remember, love!
Do you remember, love Christine?

HENRI MURGER, *Old Loves*



La Vie en Rose

My Paris is a land where twilight days
Merge into violent nights of black and gold;
Where, it may be, the flower of dawn is cold:
Ah, but the gold nights, and the scented ways!

Eyelids of women, little curls of hair,
A little nose curved softly, like a shell,
A red mouth like a wound, a mocking veil:
Phantoms, before the dawn, how phantom-fair!

And every woman with beseeching eyes,
Or with enticing eyes, or amorous,
Offers herself, a rose, and craves of us
A rose's place among our memories.

ARTHUR SYMONS, *Paris*

Au Clair de la Lune

I'll give you a thousand guesses where I was on Saturday evening and what I was doing at midnight. I was on the platform of one of the towers of Notre-Dame, and I was drinking orangeade and eating ices in company with four of my friends and an admirable moon—all that to the accompaniment of a huge owl flapping its wings around us.

It is really a very fine sight, Paris by moonlight at that hour. It resembles those towns in the *Thousand and One Nights* where a spell has been cast on the sleeping inhabitants . . . The annoying thing was that some of our party, in the presence of the moon and the owl, felt obliged to assume a poetic tone and utter a stream of commonplaces.

PROSPER MERIMEE, *Letter to Jenny Dacquin*

French Model

Auntynell's French was like her quotations, she had the gist of it. Even so, I was not prepared for her to accost the impeccable Monsieur Georges in the anteroom of his distinguished salon, with cries of: " Je voudrais voir la cocotte avec le grand nu que j'ai vu hier! "

" Not here! " Monsieur Georges exclaimed in horror.

Auntynell insisted that it was.

" Mais voyons donc," he protested, " ce n'est pas ici une maison de la sorte."

Then looking at Auntynell's intent, innocent face, something of her true quality got across to him.

" Ça ne fait rien, Madame," he said gently, " ça ne fait rien."

But Auntynell continued to insist that she wished to see the cocotte with the big naked man that she had seen before.

Then I broke in with a weak description of the hat, " la cocarde avec le grand nœud." Presently Auntynell, seated in satisfaction before a mirror with the creation perched on her silver hair, said wistfully:

" I can't understand why your pronunciation should be so much better than mine. Well, never mind, don't you think this hat's becoming? "

EVELYN EATON, *Every Month Was May*

Langue de Chat

there is something in the air
of paris archy
that makes one young again

don marquis, ***mehitabel sees paris***

BELLE OF THE BALL

I never did discover
how she got in

BY JOAN AIKEN

EASTER came late that year. The first summer race-meeting was on Easter Monday and I came over from Brighton for it, idling along in the train. Trains didn't go so fast in those days and you could hear cuckoos seesawing in and out of the woods as we made our leisurely way, and twice as loud when we stopped.

It was one of those bright blowy days with bits of toffee paper everywhere, kids with their candy ribbons whipped out of their hands, feathers blowing and swooping on the big, oyster-shaped hats that all the women were wearing that year. Down on the front it must have been a regular gale but, of course, up at the race track it was a bit more sheltered by the downs.

You hardly noticed the downs at first, with all the running and shouting and carrying-on, and the laughing and whistles and rattles, old fellows wagging their sausage-balloons, girls trying to hold down their skirts and squealing when the paper streamers tangled round their legs—and then you'd look up and see a greenish-grey shoulder of hill sloping away, as if someone had his back turned on the whole affair.

It's a pretty part. I love it. Still do.

I was over for the day, thinking I'd pick up a bit of money, which was always short with me at that time. I was young and my blood was quick-circulating and kept me restless; nothing seemed to last with me very long, and cash no time at all.

I suppose on an everyday Monday the High Street would be quiet as a river-bed, but that afternoon it was like bedlam with traffic—some cars, but mostly carts and traps—jammed from the bridge right up to the castle. They used to keep a thundering great white cockatoo at the hotel in those days, tame, and it was out and flying up and down the street like a zeppelin, rowing on those great brawny wings; every time it passed over there'd be an oo! from the crowd, and women would duck and scream. It flew so low you could see the mad orange glare of its eye; I daresay it thought we were all a bit cuckoo, too.

It was a big help to me, that bird. I'd fixed on the handkerchief game and I was working my way slowly up from the station to the race-course, taking my time over it. I'd a gross of cheap machine-lace-edged wipes, nicely folded in tissue, and the trick was to tap some old girl's shoulder most politely, and say, "Ma'am, your reticule's come open, did you know?"

"Gracious," she'd cry, "when did that happen?" and be all of a flutter, saying, "Thank you so much for telling me," and "I never noticed."

Of course she hadn't noticed because I'd flipped it open as she craned up at the cockatoo.

"Better look and see if everything's there," I'd say, looking around as if I expected to see two or three tiaras and a pearl necklace lying on the pavement.

"No," she says, "purse, comb, pins, peppermints—everything seems to be here. I am very much obliged to you, young man."

While she's in this happy and grateful mood I sell her one of my lace-edged hankies to add tone to her collection of frippery. People will buy anything in the street, specially when they feel obliged, for five times the price they'd ever consider laying out in a shop, and in a couple of hours I'd got rid of fifty fourpenny dusters for half a crown apiece.

I wasn't really in it for business, just for pin-money, and when I got up towards the race-course I eased off. For one thing, the last old die-hard, after I'd sold her my story about Chantilly lace and she'd handed over her half-crown, disconcerted me by very deliberately flicking open the tiny handkerchief and blowing her nose on it, fixing me all the time over the top of it with a bright triangular blue eye like a flint arrowhead.

"Young man," she said, "you'll go far. Too far, if anything."

There I stood, rooted, unable to move out of the presence of that eye, until she dismissed me with a little nod, not unkindly.

So I strolled off and started paying attention to the runners. I made out with a couple of low-priced ones right away, so then I took a pull and relaxed. No sense in hurrying a good chance. Mother always used to say, "Blow on your luck and give it a rub."

Crowds were still whirling up from the station, with whistles and paper snakes going full blast. It was a good day. You could smell the salt from the sea, five miles off.

I went and had a glass of stout and a sandwich at The New Pin, a chilly, smelly little place but nearest to the course, and then I strolled back, looking about, as I say, taking my time.

Then, in the three o'clock, I noticed an outsider at 100 to 1, Clever Cockatoo. That's for you, my boy, I thought, so I put a fiver on him. Silly thing to do I suppose, really, but I was feeling happy and relaxed and I knew it was my lucky day.

Clever Cockatoo strolled home by about five lengths.

In a way I was quite annoyed. I felt it had happened too early in the day. I knew if I had any sense I wouldn't bet any more, though it seemed a waste of the rest of the afternoon. Anyway, I thought, I'll give it a rest for a race or two, so I collected the takings and wandered off to a corner of the track where they'd got a little bit of a carnival going.

There were coconut shies and hoop-las and the usual side-shows, strong men, a snake-charmer, bearded lady, Astounding Peep Show, some performing dogs. I watched the snake-charmer, which was not a bad shilling's worth, though she was a skinny girl and the snakes definitely were not cobras.

Then I moved on to the last tent. In front of it was a notice that made me rub my eyes and look again, for it said, ADMISSION £5. Over that there was a picture of a naked girl standing still and staring straight ahead of her, crudely enough done, and, in larger letters: ELANA—THE GIRL IN THE BALL.

I stared at the chaps going in and, sure enough, they did seem to be handing over fivers or grubby batches of notes. Well, I thought, this is putting it over on the grand scale, and makes me look like an amateur. What persuades them to part with their money?

There was nothing so startling about the notice, and I wasn't going to be hurried into making a gull of myself just because I had all that money burning a hole in my pocket, so I hung about and watched. After five minutes or so a hand came out of the tent and reversed the notice so as to show the words, FULL UP. Then some vaguely eastern-sounding music began, plaintive and squeaky. Apart from that there was dead silence from inside the tent—not a grunt, not a murmur.

The silence lasted for about ten minutes, and then the music ended on a high, drawn-out quaver and, after a pause of a moment or so, the chaps began coming out again. I studied their faces. They certainly didn't look disappointed, or as if they thought they'd been tricked; far from it. They were discussing eagerly, excitedly, among themselves, sometimes glancing back; but as soon as the last of them was out the tent-flaps were firmly laced together again.

"Is it good?" I asked an old fellow, military-looking man.

"Remarkable," he said. "Quite remarkable. How the devil did he get her in there? Go and see for yourself, young feller."

That decided me and when the tent-flaps were opened once more I joined the stream of ingoing customers and handed over my fiver to a giant of a man in a turban. We went past him through a curtain, and you could hear a sort of sigh as each man stepped in.

The inside of the tent was quite bare, except for a roped-off square in the middle. Outside the rope was grass, trodden into chalky squidge by this time. The centre square was covered by one great piece of Indian carpet which was thin and worn, but you could still see the original colours and patterns glowing in that queer, green, luminous light that you get inside a tent in daytime.

Each man as he came in made straight for the rope and leaned out over it, the later arrivals peeling off and working farther and farther round the square till the rope was completely lined with silent, staring faces.

Occasionally a man would murmur to his neighbour.

"Is she real?"

"Looks like it."

"Why don't she move then?"

"Dunno."

In the middle of the carpet was a clear glass ball, like the ones fishermen weight their nets with; only this one was perhaps three foot six in diameter, perfectly clear glass that looked no thicker than a brandy balloon. There was no visible mark or join on it, and yet inside sat a naked girl, quite still, but, so far as we could see, alive.

She was holding a bunch of spring flowers—narcissi, grape hyacinths, and so forth—and there was a whole mass of flower heads tumbled into the ball with her.

"She must be a waxwork," somebody said, and just after that the girl moved.

She had been looking down at the flowers she held, now she lifted up her eyes and gave us a clear, attentive look, unsmiling. She was dark-eyed, with a wide mouth and long blue-black hair that hung down her back to her waist. It had a ripple in it, and looked very soft, like dark feathers. The girl was slim and, so far as I could decide, not tall, perhaps five foot two or three. As she sat, the top of the ball just cleared her head.

There was a lot of charm about that girl; she was the sort of girl you'd like to have come and sit herself down beside you on the top front seat of a double-decker bus on a fine spring day at the start of a twenty-mile journey. The only fault in her was that she never smiled, but then I daresay she couldn't be expected to feel much like smiling inside of a glass ball. Though if she

was getting a half-share of the profits you'd think she might have felt inclined to smile at the thought of twenty five-pound notes standing round her and gazing at her so seriously.

In a moment the turbaned fellow came from his seat at the entrance, ducked under the rope, brisk and businesslike, and picked up the ball. He did it quite effortlessly, but you could see the muscles in his arms ripple. Holding it before him like a beach-ball he made the tour of the ring.

"You see, gentlemen," he said, "there is no deception about this. The girl is alive, the flowers are alive, and the ball is pure glass, unflawed. If I were to drop it, it would break. Tap it if you like."

Most of us did tap it, and it rang like glass all right.

"Now," said the man, "I shall show you some juggling."

There was a little portable phonograph in one corner of the ring, and he wound this up. It had a record already on it and in a moment the doleful squeaky music began and he started his act.

It was really dancing more than juggling. He postured about with the ball for a minute or two and then tossed it in the air. When he did that the flowers whirled up inside like those snow-storm paper-weights, and then settled again as he caught it, some of them lying on the girl who was now curled up in a new position.

You could have heard twenty sighs as we all let out the breath we had been holding, and then he shifted the ball in his hands and tossed it up once more. That girl must have been made of rubber; you'd have expected her to be black and blue but I couldn't see a bruise on her. I daresay most of the audience had stiff necks next day, though, from following the ball in its flight.

Once or twice the man launched the ball towards the audience, and then dived after and caught it like a rugger player, just as they were ducking, or reaching up to finger it down. Inside the ball was like a kaleidoscope with the girl's white arms and legs at all angles and the flowers bursting upwards like bees, and her black hair sprayed across it all.

Ten minutes lasted no time at all. The record came to an end, the man stopped his weaving around and put the ball carefully down in the middle of the carpet once more.

"You like it?" he said cheerfully, and there was a murmur of "Not half" from the chaps beginning reluctantly to file out into the daylight. The girl began calmly combing her hair with her fingers, shaking the flower heads down to the bottom of the ball, and straightening her bouquet.

I filed out with the rest and stood stupidly in the raw daylight, not knowing where to go or what to do. In the end I went down

into the High Street and sold off the rest of my handkerchiefs, but it was really just to give my mind time to settle; I felt as if I had the girl and the flowers whirling about inside my head.

Then I went back and watched another performance. It was dark by now, the races were over, but the carnival was going full swing, and people were dancing in the street and up on the race-course. There was a bonfire and some men had those torches they use for Guy Fawkes—metal holders with paraffin-soaked rags flaring in them—and were running about letting out whoops and scaring the women.

The tent was lit up by greenish flickering hurricane lamps and the light reflected in the ball and in the girl's eyes was uncanny, inhuman—more like the light you see in a cat's eyes, caught in the headlights at night. The audience was tense, on edge—and very unwilling to go at the end of the performance. But the man in the turban shepherded them all out, shouting " Closing down, closing down now. No more tonight."

He caught hold of my arm as I edged between the flaps and said, " Wait." So I waited till the last man had gone grumbling out into the dark and said, " What is it? "

" You like this little show? It's a good little show, no? "

" Not bad," I said.

" You like to buy? "

" Why? You want to sell? "

" I must sell. I shoot a man in Chatham—see? Police after me. I am leaving tonight for France."

" How much? " I said.

" A thousand."

" Make it five hundred."

" O.K.," he said, " I have no time to argue."

All the time we were talking he had been changing out of his white rig and turban. I gave him the five hundred in notes and he left, blowing a kiss to the girl in the ball, and slipping out quickly between the tent-flaps.

I stood holding onto the rope staring at her, and I must confess I felt a bit scared, didn't know what was going to happen next. This certainly was shaping out into a queer day, like a page torn out of a dream. I wondered what I ought to do with the girl—did I throw a rug over her for the night, like a canary? Or what?

Then I noticed that she was making signs to me, pointing over to one corner of the tent. I looked where she was pointing and saw a hammer. When I held it up she nodded and began another pantomime. It took me a bit of time to get her drift, but at last I realized that she meant me to break the ball. That shook me a bit, because if the ball was broken, where was my

show? But then I supposed she couldn't spend her life in the ball; she had to eat. I reckoned there must be a supply of balls somewhere behind the scenes.

So I broke the ball with the hammer.

I was rather startled when I discovered that she was French, couldn't speak a word of English. Her name was Marie-Laine. While she was slipping on the navy-blue dress that lay in another corner of the tent and twisting her hair into a chignon, I pointed to the bits of broken glass ball and said, " Où sont les autres? "

She flung out her hands, shrugged, and made a noise like Pfui.

" Alors, comment construire . . .? " My French was pretty rusty and I laboured over the point I was trying to make: how the devil do we get you into another ball?

" Sais pas, moi," she said.

I gave it up for the time and, as I was pretty hungry and I reckoned she must be too, tucked my arm into hers and took her down for a steak and chips at The Anchor Hotel.

It was a funny sort of meal. She certainly was hungry—she waded into that steak, chattering away nineteen-to-the-dozen all the time in French about her stamp album which she had brought with her tucked under her other arm. She was mad about stamps. The waiter who served us got all excited and before the end of the meal she had him swapping a Suid-Afrika for a Togoland. All the men in the room were watching her with absolute fascination, she was so pretty and so much alive. She had the sort of velvety darkness and lightness of a kitten as she sat waving her expressive hands about and showing me her *timbres*.

" Come on," I said at last, " marchons. Time to go."

And we strolled back up the High Street which was empty by now, peaceful and starlit.

In the morning she was gone, with her stamp album and the rest of my money, leaving me only the tent, which was hired anyway as I soon discovered, and the memory of the sweetest night that two people ever spent on a faded old Indian carpet.

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★ ★ ★

COURT NAPPING?

I shall make a song of the Queen of Crete
Who had nïne panthers at her feet,
Who wore bright brooches in her hair—
And her private life was her own affair.

JOHN GRIMES

Tanker Trap

BY KENNETH HAYLES

JEFF DERRY dabbed his sweat-filled eyes and steadied himself. Number Seven port wing tank was topped and he nearly missed the valve switch. The *Paulette Vee* rocked under his heels the way she did when she carried only salt-water ballast and was taking heavy seas on her quarter; yet at that moment she was fast to her jetty in the Gulf, gorging black oil at the rate of a thousand tons an hour. Derry mopped the handkerchief round his neck and blamed the sluggish wind that rolled up from Arabia spiked with fire.

"What is it, Jeff? You look groggy." As young Davey Marsh approached he glanced about nervously for fear that some member of the crew might hear his familiarity. He was normally punctilious over their working relationship.

"I'm all right, kid," Derry said.

"You're sick. It shows in your eyes."

"Maybe I'll see the Doc later."

Davey watched the man sway. "You'd better hand this over, Jeff, and see him now."

"It's my responsibility and I'm seeing it through!" he snapped, then looked at the young navigating apprentice and felt a heel. He reached out and roughed the boy's hair. "Sorry, kid. Heat's getting me down, I guess."

The responsive grin conjured a picture of Linda, and Derry recalled his promise to keep an eye on the boy. Then came another recollection that smarted. Her airmail letter was still

in his pocket and he had read it a dozen times, each time cursing himself for the presumptuous tone of that letter he had posted from the Cape.

Linda Marsh was not the type of girl you made plans for. You either got her co-operation or nothing. Yet he knew he would never have written with such impatience had he not been bored with that enforced stay in Cape Town when the generator had burnt out.

Six days of time on his hands. He had spent most of them examining diamonds with an inexpert eye, until he was the possessor of a solitaire for which he had paid more than a Chief Officer should be able to afford. That was all right in itself. The mistake, he could see all too clearly now, had been the long-distance proposal and his Canadian aggressiveness.

As though sharing his thoughts, Davey said, "You're not letting that letter from Sis get you down, are you?"

Derry forced a grin, but wasn't sure that he made it. The *Paulette Vee* bucked to another non-existent wave under her quarter and a surge of nausea washed through him like scalding steam. "Hell, no. Deserved it, I guess. Give her time." Words came from his brain and swam away unspoken. He fought for control, heard Davey's cry, pushed the boy back as he tried to grab his arm.

He found his voice. "I'm O.K. What's left? Have we topped Number Seven centre? Lord, it's hot."

Then the valve wheels went crazy and wrenched from their beds to smack up at him.

He tumbled headlong into a tunnel that was black and wet and filled with a meaningless jumble of voices like the babble of the Arabs that teemed in the oil plant ashore. After an eternity the tunnel spewed him up to a wasteland that was sometimes a desert of burning sand, and sometimes a blanket of snow that was crisp and biting like winter in his native Alberta. When it was like winter it was good because he could eat the snow, which made sweet water and poured relief into his blood . . .

The walls were clinically white, and his beard scratched on stiff linen as he moved his head. A man's figure steadied in his field of vision. There was also a dusky-skinned nurse. Derry treated himself to her first, and she smiled back. When the man, tall and Germanic, with glinting coal-chip eyes, moved closer to the side of the bed, he probed his brain for a point of contact.

" I'm Pilgrim," the man announced. " Vogoil agent in the Gulf."

Pilgrim. Half-conscious now, the name nagged at Derry's brain until he could place it. He nodded. " I guess I was kicked by a *mosquito with boots on.*"

" You have had malaria before? "

" Picked it up in Central America six or seven years back; but this is the first recurrence." With an effort he lifted himself to an elbow, and looked at the nurse. " How was I? "

Her teeth flashed. " Three times you propose to me, Mr. Derry. I am of a mind to sue you for the solitaire ring you promised."

Weakness pulled him back to the pillow. " Hope I haven't caused you any inconvenience, Mr. Pilgrim. I'll be getting back to the *Paulette Vee* as soon as I catch my wind."

Pilgrim angled his head to include the nurse in his speech. " I think a few days' convalescence is on the agenda."

" But what about the *Paulette*? She can't sail without a Chief Officer."

" She already has, Mr. Derry. Two days ago."

" What? " He tried to pull himself up again. " You mean to say I . . ."

Pilgrim's hand was on his shoulder. " It just goes to prove that none of us is indispensable. But don't worry, there's a Line tanker due in three days. I shall arrange a berth on her for you."

Pilgrim was moving to the door while Derry's brain struggled with simple arithmetic. The *Paulette Vee* had lost six days in

Cape Town and she was now two days out from the Gulf port. Three more days for the new ship made eleven.

"That must be the *Michelle Vee*!" His cry caused Pilgrim to turn.

"Yes, the *Michelle*. Captain McBede."

Derry groaned. They had shipped together before; but only once—McBede had seen to that. They went together like sugar and cyanide.

On a map, Vogoil Haven resembles a wart that protrudes from the chin of Essex into the estuary of the Thames; but a worm's eye view gives a less pathological picture.

To the uninitiated romantic, it might be an interplanetary station, with its steel-laced sky-lines of stills and strippers, its extractors, crackers, and platformers that dominate the wharves and dumpy storage tanks. Arteries of silver-painted steel weld the various plants into a functional whole, leading the black crude from process to process—breaking, sifting, extracting, and refining—pumping it on through lesser veins to fulfil its thousand and one duties, for the industry treats its God-given product with good husbandry, wasting not one drop.

In the administrative heart of this colossus worked Linda Marsh—slim, attractive, brunette, and possessing all the less visible qualities that go to the making of a perfect secretary. Boss Carrington was aware of these qualities and at times envied Brysten her services. He knew he could go over his production manager's head and claim her, of course; but Brysten had picked her from the pool and so was entitled to keep her. Besides, if things went the way he predicted with Jeff Derry, she wouldn't be with the Company much longer anyway.

These casual thoughts had been reassembled in Boss Carrington's mind when the report came in that afternoon. When he rang for her she appeared in the spacious, panelled office, where he and Brysten were waiting, as efficient as ever, with pencil and pad in her hand. He watched her nod to Brysten.

"Sit down, Miss Marsh," Boss Carrington said. He was ill at ease and felt sure that she sensed it. When she folded back the cover of her shorthand book he came round the desk and took it gently from her fingers.

"You won't need that, Miss Marsh."

Brysten had turned to the window and was staring across the concrete compound to the pipe-stitched catalytic cracker.

Apprehension coiled tight like a snake inside Linda. "What is it, Mr. Carrington?" she asked. "Why do you wish to see me?"

"Miss Marsh . . ." Carrington pushed a finger through the silver stubble of his moustache, experiencing difficulty of speech. "We—I mean—I have received a report."

"Report?"

"A shipping report . . . from Lloyds."

Her hands flew to her mouth. She jerked to her feet. Her exclamation was scarcely audible. "The *Paulette Vee*!"

He started to say something, then plucked a paper from the desk and passed it to her. He was not handling it at all well, he knew.

When the girl swayed, it was Bill Brysten who moved quickly across to help her, and ease her back into the chair. Without hearing his gruffly-spoken condolences, she stared blankly ahead for a full minute before she was able to find her voice.

"You are sure there were no survivors?"

"That's our only authority so far," Brysten's soft Irish brogue told her. "But I'm sadly afraid the chances are slender."

"How did it happen?"

"An explosion," Carrington said. "That's all we know. I've been in touch with our Gulf agent, but he could only tell us that the *Paulette Vee* blew up three days out of the Gulf."

"Davey . . ."

The name fell from her numb lips like lead.

Carrington said, as though by way of compensation, "The only crew member who is safe is Chief Officer Derry. He was taken off the ship with fever." But the information did not appear to register.

"Davey," she repeated hoarsely. "Davey."

Jeff Derry leaned on the deck rail of the *Michelle Vee* and demanded the reason for the disturbance on the jetty below. It was an Arab with the Captain's laundry; he was gesticulating furiously, and arguing with the man on duty at the bottom of the gangway, who shouted up, "I've told him he can't come aboard, sir, but he won't let me take it till he's been paid."

Derry collared an able seaman and sent him down to find out how much the man wanted, and to conduct the business. On no account was the native to be permitted to come aboard.

Derry moved along the welded-steel deck, stepping carefully over the pipes that spanned from the fore-and-aft bridge to the tank hatches. He was tackling with zeal his emergency post as security officer; yet still he found difficulty in grasping the horrific truth of the *Paulette Vee* tragedy. And young Davey Marsh. Davey, whom he had promised Linda he would watch over. No more than a kid. How he had let her down.

He had wanted to cable her straight away; but had not done so, knowing the impossibility of conveying his deep anguish in the block print of a telegraph streamer. If only he could see her face to face—as he should have done with his proposal—then he might be able to explain that what had happened to Davey was no fault of his.

With a jolt his mind returned to a truer perspective; if he had been with him, he, too, would be dead now . . .

The great flexible pipes were being uncoupled, for the belly of the tanker was full—nearly fifteen thousand tons of liquid that had been more than a hundred million years in the making.

Derry faltered in his step as Captain McBede appeared from the officers' cabin deck and descended the ladder towards him. He was in whites, with a close-clipped greying beard that accentuated the cut-beef redness of the rest of his face.

He approached with a sardonic smile. "And how many bombs have ye piped aboard my ship, Chief Officer?"

The Canadian flushed. There was something indecent, he thought, about a man who could joke over a thing like that. He decided to return the ball with stiff formality.

"Everything is in order, Captain; but I shall carry out a further inspection when she's standing off."

"Can't say I blame you," McBede grunted. "You've your own hide to consider this time. Ye cannot afford to make any mistakes.",

"It's yet to be proved there was a mistake by anyone last time," Derry retorted with mounting anger.

"Perhaps. Still, ye were damn lucky with your fever."

"I'm here to take your orders, Captain, not your insults. And I'll remind you that I didn't ask to be drafted to this ship."

McBede's face screwed in like a red leather ball that has lost its wind. "Are ye thinking it was I who put in a special request? We can do without Jonahs with this cargo!"

"Maybe you won't have to carry a Jonah."

"Another fever coming on?" he asked with squeezed sarcasm.

Derry bit his cheek to stem the anger. "As you've so delicately reminded me, I was the person responsible for loading the *Paulette*. There are bound to be investigations out here and it's on the cards I'll be detailed to wait for them."

"That, Derry, would suit me admirably," McBede said, and turned away abruptly to continue down the deck.

But the recall did not come until the *Michelle Vee* was standing off awaiting sailing orders. Derry had completed the final ship's search and put in his report of satisfaction to McBede; in return the bearded Captain tossed him a paper.

"*And the Lord spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land,*" he quoted. "You're to go ashore in the pilot launch."

Pilgrim was at the jetty to meet him, austere and unsmiling.

"I could have laid a bet with McBede that I wouldn't sail in his blasted tub," he told the man triumphantly.

"Sorry I couldn't notify you earlier. The message has only just come through."

"When are they due out?"

"Due out? Who?"

Derry swung his arm in a loose gesture. "The insurance investigators. That's why I was recalled, wasn't it—to help with the inquiries?"

"I suppose so," Pilgrim said, "but not here. My orders are to have you flown back to England on the first available aircraft."

It was evening when the Constellation touched down at London Airport.

Jeff Derry's first move upon clearing the customs was to ring Boss Carrington at his private address. He learnt that an extraordinary meeting of directors was to be held at Vogoil Haven the following morning for the purpose of discussing the loss of the *Paulette Vee*, and he was to be present to answer any questions that might be put.

Thankful not to be burdened with immediate commitments, he took the airport bus into London and made for the Bayswater apartment house that was his home whenever he was in town. Refreshed by a bath, a shave, and a change, he took a cab which cut through the park to Kensington and deposited him at the entrance of Rochester Mansions.

Uncertainty welled up as he stood at the door of Linda's flat; but he fought it down, knowing that the moment had to be faced. He knew just what he would say. He knew, too, in a shadowy way, that he would promptly forget all the trite, rehearsed phrases the moment he saw her.

He saw the shock hit her and the tremble of it pass through her body. She was wearing a pink housecoat, and stared at him from the half-open door, her green eyes wide with disbelief.

"Jeff! What are you doing back here?"

"You didn't know I'd been recalled? Didn't Bill tell you?"

Linda shook her head numbly. "Mr. Brysten said nothing to me." She blinked with confusion and stepped back. "You'd better come in."

The barrier was there as he had feared and expected, and because of it he made no attempt to kiss her. As he walked into

the lounge its newly-felt desolation stabbed at him. Davey, selfconscious in his new uniform, smiled from the framed photograph on the mantelpiece.

" I suppose you were brought back for the Court of Inquiry? " she asked from behind him.

" The officia' Inquiry will come later. This is just . . ." He had turned to face her, and his words died when he saw that her features were expressionless. He took a step towards her. " Linda, I—I don't have to tell you how deeply I feel about Davey."

" It's over. Finished. Nothing can bring him back, so . . ." A sob caught her throat, dissipating her self control.

As she spun away Derry caught her arms from behind. He said gently, " Go ahead, Linda. You don't have to hold it back. I know how you feel." And suddenly she was in his arms, her face pressed wetly to his shoulder.

" I try to convince myself that it doesn't matter because it's finished; but it's not as easy as that."

" I know. Believe me, I know."

" He was all the family I had left."

Derry's brain came alive with all he had planned to say, but he knew immediately how pompous it would sound. Instead he said inadequately, " Davey was a good kid. He'd have made a fine officer."

She drew away from him and wiped her eyes. " It's what Father wanted for him. He was lost at sea himself, in the war."

" Davey told me." His fists clenched at the soaring rage in him. Able to control it no longer, he burst out violently, " God, it shouldn't have happened! I should have been there with him."

" There's nothing you could have done."

" I guess not. Yet somehow I feel guilty."

" Guilty? "

" As though I'd deliberately side-stepped something and let the others walk into it." Suddenly, he caught the expression in her eyes—they were red with grief but showing something else that caused him to draw in a breath of uneasy concern.

" Why did it happen, Jeff? " she asked coldly.

" I don't know." He took a cigarette packet from his pocket. " Nobody knows. That's what I was flown home for, to help find out. Although, with the ship completely gone and no survivors, I don't see how they can end up with anything but theories."

" Could have been . . . planned? "

" Sabotage? " He shrugged, lit his cigarette, and blew out a

stream of smoke. " It's a possibility, but I don't see it myself. There's a strict security at the supply port, and it would literally be suicide for a crew member to try anything like that unless he could get out of sailing in the ship."

The words were out before he realized their significance, and he hurried on in an attempt to cover them. " I'd say the cause was accidental."

" I understood the safety code on tankers reduced risks to practically nil," she said, and Derry had not missed the brittle edge on her voice.

" The *Paulette* was a prewar ship," he said defensively. " She hadn't kept up with the latest developments. And of course there's no accounting for the human element."

" At sea—or in port, do you mean? " She stood three paces from him, straight-backed, her eyes a burning challenge.

" Linda . . ."

" As Chief Officer you were responsible for taking on the cargo, weren't you? "

" Well yes, until I was keeled over with that bout of malaria. But look, let's not mix facts and emotions."

" These are not just my ideas, Jeff. There's talk . . ." She stopped abruptly, snapping her eyes from him as she realized the foolishness of it.

" There's talk? What talk? " Derry had felt the bite of a steel trap. " For heaven's sake tell me, what talk? "

" Nothing. I'm sorry, Jeff." She quivered with self-reproach.

" What kind of talk? "

" Please forget it. It's not important."

As she made to move away his hand shot out to her shoulder. He felt the anger shed through his tightening grip. " You've got to tell me, Linda. You've got to tell what's been said."

Her small hands wrenched at his wrist and she pulled free. " Very well." Her voice was defiant, sharpened by the sudden physical pain.

" They're saying you were fortunate to have missed being on the *Paulette*, and if there's any negligence proved it's not going to look so good for you."

" Who says this? " He was breathing deeply now, his blood pounding.

" No one in particular. It's general talk at the refinery. You know how these things go."

He stared unblinkingly into her face for a long while. " Tell me, Linda. Do you believe I was responsible for the sinking of that ship? For what happened to Davey and the others? Do you believe that? "

He watched her turn away heavy with shame, and as quickly his own anger melted.

He wanted only to crush her to him to dispel the nightmare of loss and doubt, to convey to her somehow that he would make up for Davey. Although he scarcely realized it, his hand drifted to his pocket and the hard square lump of the ring box; but he knew instinctively that the barrier between them was not yet lifted.

Without turning to him, she said, "I'm content to let the Court of Inquiry form my opinions for me."

Of the seven men present in the board room, Bill Brysten was the only one that Derry knew intimately. Their friendship had begun when the Irishman returned from the Gulf on Derry's ship to take up his present appointment. It was, in fact, through this association that he had come to meet Linda. Boss Carrington he knew well enough, but only in a working relationship. Of those remaining, Derry recognized four as Directors of the Vogoil Petroleum Company.

He could not place the seventh person; a large man, somewhat beyond his own years, with an athletic body, ramrod straight, and austere features that appeared devoid of sensitivity.

He was introduced simply as Mr. Gower, with no indication of the reason for his presence. Derry decided that he must be a legal adviser, or else perhaps a representative of the insurance company.

Soon, however, his mind was fully occupied with questions fired at him by the board. He gave a concise verbal report of his association with the *Paulette Vee*, his assessment of the ship, her safety regulations, her capabilities, and her crew.

Finally he was asked to give a minute-by-minute account of his part in her last loading operation up to the time he was stricken with fever.

A heavy silence followed his terminating sentence, and all eyes were fixed on Gower. The man shut his notebook and pocketed it in a clipped, guardsman-like manner, then rose to his feet and proceeded to dominate the inquiry with a series of double-edged sword thrusts.

"You are, I believe, a Canadian?" he asked, seeming purposely to omit the courtesy of using Derry's name.

"The Company has full details of my nationality," Derry said, refraining in sheer pique from a direct answer. He turned appealingly to Boss Carrington, feeling that at least some explanation of Gower's role was due to him.

Carrington blinked uneasily. "Mr. Gower has not yet had

access to Company files, Derry. You will answer him as fully as possible."

Gower ignored the original question and asked, " How long have you been with the Vogoil Company? "

" Five years."

" At sea? "

" That's right."

" On the Persian Gulf run? "

" Mostly."

" Explain that, please."

Derry was hating the man's guts for his ice-cold arrogance. " I was twelve months on the Far Eastern schedule."

Carrington broke in to summarize the extensive coverage of the Vee Line tanker fleet.

It was then that Derry decided Gower was not a lawyer. Insurance, maybe. Yes, that would be it; insurance. But need he be so offensive in his approach? Then came the thrust that took his breath away.

" Are you a Communist, Derry? "

His jaw tightened and he spoke through clenched teeth, " No, I am not."

" Are you in sympathy with present trends in Arab policy? "

Derry flushed and turned to Carrington. " Do I have to answer questions like this? I don't see how details of my personal life can help in discovering the cause of the loss of the *Paulette Vee*."

Before Boss Carrington could answer, Gower said, " It is my responsibility to make a full and complete exploration of the incident."

" You are questioning my moral integrity. Do you think I'd murder my own shipmates? "

" Answer my question," the icy voice persisted. " What are your views on Arab policy? "

" I hold no strong political views whatever."

" You belong to no creed? "

" Politically, no."

" Do you believe in world federation? "

Derry's patience was on the skid. " I believe any man has a right to a say in the domestic affairs of his own country."

" Are you financially secure, Derry? "

He sucked in a breath and looked appealingly from Carrington to Bill Brysten; but each avoided his eye.

He said hotly, " What has that got to do with you? "

Then, sobering, " I'm not a millionaire, but that doesn't mean I'd cut anybody's throat for ten cents."

"Have you ever had a bank overdraft?"

"No."

Gower switched the attack. "What in your opinion caused the loss of the *Paulette Vee*?"

"She blew up, I suppose."

"Why would you suppose that?"

"There were no survivors. It must have been quick. One tank can start a chain reaction."

"And the cause?"

"I'm in no position to say, but I should think it was accidental."

"Negligence?"

"Not necessarily. There are a thousand unknown factors. She could have tangled with a drifting mine left over from the war."

"Hardly likely, wouldn't you think?"

"It was hardly likely that the *Titanic* should hit an iceberg," he threw back.

"And what if it were sabotage?"

"In that case I guess you'll have to do your snooping in the Gulf."

"Yes." The man turned his back and walked across the room, only to spin swiftly on his heel. "Are you aware, Derry, that an attack of fever can be simulated with the use of drugs known to the Arabs?"

Bill Brysten gave a murmur of protest at this. Gower dismissed the question, only to replace it with another, slightly less barbed yet still personal. The inquisition continued for an hour: an ordeal of character-stripping and humiliation that Derry survived only with a tremendous effort of will.

His suppressed explosiveness burst through later in the presence of Carrington and Bill Brysten.

"I'm sorry you were subjected to such a humiliating grilling," Carrington said. "But I do assure you it was beyond my authority to intervene."

Derry turned to him with dawning realization. "You mean there's a government stake in this?"

"Oil is more than a commercial commodity. Progress has made it a vital economic necessity. While I agree with you that the loss of the *Paulette* was probably accidental, the government must be in a position to nip in the bud any act that appears in the least way treasonable."

"Well, if Gower has such a suspicious mind, why doesn't he exercise it in the Gulf?"

"He already has a man out there," Carrington said. He sat down, looking suddenly tired and old, and his fingers pushed

nervously into the stubbly bristles of his moustache. " We must now prepare our own report for the Court of Inquiry."

" Meantime I suppose I'm suspended from service? "

His eyes glinted as they sought Carrington's; but it was Brysten who replied. " It's essential that you keep in close contact with the Company, Jeff. I suggest to Mr. Carrington that we find something to occupy you here at Vogoil Haven."

" But I'm a seaman. I only know ships."

Brysten smiled. " We have tankers calling occasionally, you might be aware. There are certain port duties you could undertake in a relief capacity." He lifted a friendly hand to Derry's shoulder. " Cheer up, man. You've nothing to worry about. But this is a serious business, and you must remember that Gower is a mite outside our fraternity."

In spite of his efforts to immerse himself in the tasks allotted to him at the refinery, Jeff Derry found no mental relief. Each day, each hour even, he expected a curt summons to present himself at some obscure government office.

His contact with Linda was spasmodic and distant. At the weekend, when he called at her flat, she had left for a short visit to the country, and he decided it was a deliberate attempt to avoid him.

The only person with whom he found he could discuss his frustration was Bill Brysten, but their relationship was not close enough to banish the haunting fears born of Davey's death, Linda's rejection, and Gower's suspicion—and that small but nagging corner of guilt in his own mind which suggested that in some way he must have erred.

Such brooding did not improve his temper. He found himself becoming surly. He reduced a young apprentice almost to tears over a misdemeanour so slight that in normal circumstances he would have overlooked it. And he raised excessive hell with a dumb-looking fitter named Gray whom he suspected of leaving Number Four centre tank hatch loose on the *Rosa Vee* after she had discharged her oil. Only Brysten, watching him sagely, fully appreciated the weight on the man's mind . . .

The *Michelle Vee*, nine days out from the Gulf, carved a southern course off the coast of Africa heading for the Mozambique Channel. She had the sea to herself. Captain McBede came down the companion-ladder from the bridge and took himself to the rail of the cabin deck where he peered into the dusk, supremely content with the time they were making.

Then, turning to his cabin, his eye caught the curious phenomenon of the after deck lifting and splitting to disgorge a

thunderous belch of red and yellow flame. A yell for the smother steam barely trembled his lips before the blast hit him like an invisible hand. As he was flung brokenly across the steel deck he heard the start of a hurrying chain of explosions . . .

The persistent buzz of his electric shaver was a blanket on the radio, but the name of the Company came through and Derry stopped shaving to listen, first with disbelief, then with awe. *The SOS had been picked up in Mombasa, but the transmitter had gone off the air almost immediately. Planes and ships were searching the area.*

As he turned off the radio he noticed that his hand was trembling. He sat down, completely shattered. From a whirlpool of conjecture one dominant thought emerged. Somewhere along the line he had betrayed his responsibility.

He knew now that the *Paulette Vee*'s loss had not been accidental. Coincidences like that just did not happen. Security at the Gulf port had been breached. He had failed, fallen short. He had given McBede clearance on his ship and sent him off, possibly to his death.

He sat for a long time searching his conscience, until the weight of his self-pronounced culpability became unbearable. He knew he must talk to someone, try to explain that he had done his best. And perhaps that someone could help him to understand himself. He crossed to the phone and spun Linda's number out of the dial.

"I've just finished reading about it in the paper," she told him. There was a hollow tone to her voice; she seemed a century away.

"I must see you," he said desperately.

"I'm sorry, Jeff. I have to get down to the plant, and my train leaves in thirty minutes."

"I'll come down with you."

"No, Jeff, I—I'd rather you didn't."

"Linda, listen to me. I've got to talk to somebody . . ."

"I must go now," she said.

A click told him the line was dead.

He knew the train she would be catching and he fancied that if he hurried he could reach the station in time. But he was arrested by a shrill recall to the telephone.

"Is that you, Jeff?" There was no mistaking the Irish lilt in the voice.

"Bill! What news?"

"I've no more than is already in the papers. I'll be driving down to the plant; can I pick you up on the way?"

Derry sucked in a breath. "Whose idea is that?" he asked suspiciously.

"Carrington rang me. He mentioned that Gower would be coming in."

"And they want to make sure I turn up, is that it?"

"Be rational, Jeff. I thought it might be more convenient for you. I'll be there in about twenty minutes. Will that suit you?"

"O.K.," Derry said flatly.

"I just can't understand it," he pronounced for the tenth time. He stared unseeingly at Brysten's capable hands on the steering wheel. "It doesn't add up."

"There's more than Arab interest at stake in the Middle East," Brysten said.

Derry nodded. Then a thought struck him. "What do you know about Pilgrim?"

"I know him pretty well. Didn't I work with him for three years in the Gulf?"

"He's not British, is he?"

"Yes. What makes you ask?"

"I thought he had a bit of an accent. He's not English."

Brysten nodded again. "Born in Manchester, I believe. Though, now I come to think of it, his mother was foreign. Not that it means anything. Pilgrim is a good man. Conscientious. I'd back him any time."

"Sorry, Bill," he said. "Heaven knows, I don't want to put the finger on anybody without reason, but if there's anything going on out there it must be somewhere inside the supply base."

They went straight to Brysten's office because Carrington had not yet arrived at the plant; but Derry found no opportunity of speaking to Linda. She was present, however, when Boss Carrington eventually arrived with Gower. But when Bill Brysten ascertained that the discussions were to take place in his office he promptly asked Linda to leave them.

"No, she may stay," Gower said. He turned to Carrington. "With your permission I should like someone to take notes."

"I'll arrange for a stenographer from the pool," Carrington said. "Miss Marsh was personally involved in the loss of the *Paulette Vee*. She may find it distressing to remain."

"No, please, I—" Linda hesitated as she saw Derry turn quickly to her. She took in a breath and tilted her chin a fraction higher. "I would like to help, Mr. Carrington."

"Very well. It's entirely up to you."

"I'll stay."

"Right," Gower said crisply. "There is no need to waste time on preliminaries. We all know the reason for this meeting."

He turned to address himself to Derry. "You were, I believe, seconded to the *Michelle Vee* as her security officer?"

"I was."

"Then I should like a full account of your activities from the time of your appointment."

As Derry spoke he was acutely conscious of Linda's presence. It was more than the flick and rub of her pencil as it filled page after page with skidding symbols. It was the way she kept her head down, not lifting it even during the pauses and, at variance to this, the defiant squareness of her shoulders. Yet she was a reasonable person, level-headed. It could be only that what had happened to Davey had thrown her off balance against him.

He gave Gower every detail except one. He saw no point in aggravating his position by admitting the antagonism that existed between himself and McBede.

"Had you any prior knowledge that you were not to sail in the *Michelle Vee*?" Gower asked.

"Of course not."

"But you had an idea such might be the case?"

"I was prepared to sail."

"You are evading my question, Mr. Derry."

Careful, he thought. Don't row too hard against the stream. "I guessed there was a chance I'd be recalled after the *Paulette* incident."

"Were you willing to bet you would not sail in the *Michelle Vee*?"

Blast! Pilgrim. He had forgotten about that. Of course, he should have realized they had been in touch with the Gulf.

He said, "I'm not a betting man." Then he balanced his statement with a carefully nonchalant gesture, "Though figuratively speaking I may have expressed it that way."

"In relief, perhaps?"

Rage boiled inside him. He could choke Gower for his insinuations. "Yes, if you like, in relief. But not in the way you want to twist it. I was as determined as anyone to get to the bottom of the *Paulette Vee* business."

"Why?"

"The crew were my shipmates. That may not mean anything to a mind like yours, Gower."

"Easy, Jeff." Brysten placed a hand on his arm.

Gower's voice droned on—a scalpel blade that was layer-cutting his mind.

"What are your Arab affiliations?"

"I have none. What are you trying to pin down? We've been through all this before."

"We have. But this time I require the correct answers."

"What do you mean?" Jeff Derry gritted his teeth, making a supreme effort to swallow back his loathing, his impatience, his utter wonderment at the man's stupidity.

For the first time since the interview started, Gower shifted his magnetic eyes from Derry. "I am flying to the Gulf tomorrow at midday. You are to accompany me. Meanwhile you will return to your apartment and stay there until an official car picks you up in the morning."

Derry switched his eyes appealingly to Carrington; but the old man nodded confirmation. Compressing his lips, Derry stalked across to the door, and as he let himself out he caught a glimpse of the confusion etched on Linda's face.

When Linda left the office that evening, instead of continuing her journey home as usual by Underground, she hailed a taxi and gave the address of Jeff Derry's rooms.

Getting no reply to her persistent ringing, she tried his door. The latch was off. Pressing open the door she went inside, switched on the light, and called his name softly.

The small lounge was thick with fumes and his jacket—the one he had worn at the office that morning—lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. Linda crossed to the table, picked up a tumbler, and smelt it. Across the room on the carpet lay a ring box, and nearby a solitaire diamond ring. She stooped to pick up these two items.

"Jeff! Jeff, are you there?"

There was no response, so she opened the bedroom door. In the shaft of light that flooded from the lounge she saw him sprawled fully dressed on the bed. Beside him was an empty whisky bottle.

"Jeff, wake up." She wrenched at his shoulders.

He groaned and blinked his eyes, his fuddled brain scarcely able to believe the evidence transmitted to it. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, winced at the movement, then held his head as another moan escaped his lips.

"What're you doing here? You seemed to think I was poison," he mumbled.

She looked down at him with a mixture of pity and disgust. "I don't know why I troubled to come."

He pushed himself up, rocked slightly on his heels, steadied himself, and crossed to the washbasin to feed tablets into a glass of water.

"Maybe it's the maternal instinct," he said sourly. "Compassion for the underdog."

"I'm sorry, Jeff. Let's not start off like this . . ."

"We broke step six bridges ago, didn't we?"

"I said I was sorry. Don't blame me for what I thought and felt," she pleaded.

"When you get news like I did about Davey, your mind stops behaving rationally for a while. It was only there in the office today, seeing what you were going through, that I realized just how badly things might turn out for you."

Derry swallowed the contents of the glass and nodded his head. "It's coming to me, and you can't stop it," he said briefly. "I boobed my job. I might just as well have placed bombs in the ships myself."

"Jeff, I've been thinking about this, and it seems to me that a fully-loaded tanker is almost a bomb in itself—"

"Except that they don't usually carry detonators."

"That's what I mean," she said eagerly. "Detonators can be small, can't they?"

"Even if they were pin-heads," he said with a shrug, "I still don't see how they could be got through our security screen at the Gulf—unless by a member of the crew bent on suicide."

"I don't believe anything got through security at the Gulf," Linda said.

He turned to her, puzzled.

"There is a timing coincidence in the sinking of the two ships," she said. "I've been studying the sailing lists."

"The *Paulette* blew up three days out of the Gulf, the *Michelle* nine days. I don't see any coincidence in that."

Her lips tightened with impatience. "The *Paulette* lost six days in Cape Town on the way out, didn't she? If you make allowance for that you'll find each ship was lost exactly forty-nine days after leaving her berth at Vogoil Haven."

Derry whistled. "So if detonators were used with the same timing device, they were already on board when the ships arrived at the Gulf." He grabbed her arm as hope surged through him. "Have you spoken to anyone about this?"

She shook her head. "Mr. Carrington and Brysten went back to London with Gower soon after you left."

Derry made a dive for the directory and searched for Brysten's private number. He felt heady, but more from excitement than alcohol. Linda watched him dial the number.

"Jeff here," he said as soon as Brysten answered. "When does the *Rosa Vee* sail?"

"Early tomorrow morning. Why?"

"Bill, will you do me a favour? I want you to take me down to the refinery."

"When?"

"Now."

"What? I have an engagement."

"Break it. You know the way things are, Bill, they'd never let me through the gates alone. But you can fix it. I've got to get aboard the *Rosa Vee*."

"Why? What is all this, Jeff?"

"I'll explain later," he said. "I'm on my way to your place now." He waited only to hear Brysten's reluctant agreement before slamming down the instrument and turning to Linda. "We'll get a cab and I'll drop you off at your flat. Whatever you do, keep this to yourself. If my hunch is correct, somebody at the refinery is for the high jump, and the less prepared he is the better."

As they were leaving the building a figure broke from the shadows. Derry knew the significance of it at once.

"Bloodhound," he said with measured insolence in the man's face. Linda's hand tightened on his arm.

The man said, "You had orders from Gower to stay inside until you were picked up tomorrow. You are not simplifying your position, Mr. Derry."

For a moment the idea of co-operation sparked in his mind; but it was immediately swamped by revulsion. He said, "If Gower has any authority to hold me under house arrest I'd like to see the warrant."

"If you want my advice—"

"I'll cable for it," he said, and pushed past the man.

As they hurried down the dimly-lit street, Derry spoke quietly but rapidly to Linda. "He's bound to follow. I'll have to lose him."

"Why not co-operate with them?" she asked.

"Because until I can turn speculation into proof I don't stand a chance with Gower. There's a rank ahead, we'll pick up a cab. You go back to your flat and wait there. With a little luck, we'll have bloodhound squatting on your doorstep half the night."

In the dark, they walked rapidly down the rank and turned into one of the waiting taxis.

When they were both inside, with the door closed, the driver pressed the starter button, then glanced round in surprise as the off-side door opened narrowly to discharge fifty per cent of his passenger load.

A pound note flicked through the window into the driver's lap, together with the hoarse instruction, "Get going!"

Holding back in the shadows, Jeff Derry watched Linda's taxi disappear. Then, with a sigh of satisfaction, he saw another vehicle pull away from the tail of the rank and follow . . .

It was an hour before midnight when Brysten's car passed through the refinery gates to speed on down the narrow roads that were picked out with mushrooms of light. The humming of diesels and machinery livened the air as the night shift nursed the plants through their never-ceasing operations.

Brysten drew to a halt near the jetty where the black, whale-like bulk of the *Rosa Vee* lay.

" You must admit I've been patient this far, Jeff," he said quizzically. " But haven't I the right now to know what exactly is going on inside that head of yours? "

" You will," Derry promised. " But be a pal and get the duty officer to have Number Four centre tank blown out while I pick up some protective clothing from stores."

Brysten spluttered, " You mean . . .? "

" I mean we're going down into Number Four. Now go and fix it like a good fella," he said, and before Brysten had time for further protest he was hurrying towards the stores.

Twenty-five minutes later the two men were disappearing through the deck hatch onto the treacherous oil-coated ladder under the eyes of a duty-watch seaman.

Although the tank had been blown clear of fumes, the atmosphere remained heady. Two torch beams cut the blackness with wedges of silver. Having descended to the first platform, the men crossed to the second ladder which took them down to the bottom of the tank some thirty feet below the hatchway.

" Do you mind telling me what we're looking for? " Brysten's voice echoed metallically in the huge steel box.

" I'm not sure," Derry admitted. " Something that shouldn't be here, I guess."

Brysten expressed forceful disapproval of the escapade as they stumbled heavy-booted in the oil residue that coated the floor, and dripped from the ribs, pipes, and bulkheads.

Even Derry became dispirited when a prolonged search brought nothing to light. His mouth started filling with the saline of sickness from the whisky and from the oil fumes he had absorbed. He was at the point of giving up when he found it.

It was lying between two bottom stringers and he realized that his eyes must have passed over it a dozen times, for, being of a grey plastic material, it resembled a bubble of oil. He picked it up and held it in the palm of his gloved hand, a sachet about three inches in diameter and an inch thick. Something rolled freely inside it.

"What the devil is it?"

"An incendiary." Derry placed the torch under it to reveal the blurred outline of an inner capsule. "I'm no chemist, but my guess is that this is a pocket of inflammable gas, and the tube inside holds a liquid with an acid content. After a certain time lapse—about fifty days if the *Paulette* and the *Michelle* are anything to go by—the liquid eats through the tube and produces a flash on contact with the gas."

Brysten's face was a mask of horror in the torchlight. "So when the tank is filled at the Gulf, this floats up with the oil level?"

"That's about the drill. And there are always a few inches of freeboard left in the tanks for tropical expansion."

The Irishman nodded. "Vulnerable inches of explosive fumes." A shuddering hiss of breath escaped his lips. "But how did it get here?"

"I've a shrewd idea about that, too," Derry told him. "Do you know a fitter on the plant named Gray?"

"I can't place him for the moment."

"Well, I can. I bawled him out for leaving Number Four hatch loose a couple of days back."

"Why didn't you report it?"

Derry shrugged. "It didn't register as anything more than carelessness at the time; I must have come on him just after he'd tossed this thing down."

"Let's get up aloft," Brysten suggested. "These fumes are knocking me for six."

While they were kicking off their oil-besmirched overalls on the jetty, Derry said quietly, "Where do we go from here? Carrington? Or Gower?"

"Neither." The reply was immediate and decisive.

Derry smiled grimly. "I'm glad you said that, Bill. I wanted to give you the casting vote, but I'd feel very much more confident if we could turn up with the body that goes with this little contraption."

"I'll go across to the office block and see if I can find this man Gray's address."

"I'll come with you."

"No. No need for that," Brysten told him. "Take these things back to the stores then wait in the car. I shan't be long."

The Islington address turned out to be a basement in one of those drab, three-storeyed Victorian houses that stand in strip terraces. There was a spear-topped iron fence that demarcated the basement area from the pavement, and the two men descended

the stone steps, past the lighted, curtained window, to the door.

Although the bell rang clearly inside, there was no response. Derry was angry, frustrated. He examined the door and decided it was not excessively formidable, so, bracing himself against the backing wáll, he placed one foot above the lock and pressed. Something gave and the door moved a fraction. Thus encouraged, he withdrew his heel about eighteen inches and lashed out. There was a splintering wrench and the door flew open to crack resoundingly against the inner passage wall.

He dived inside instantly, stumbling down the dim tunnel to where a splinter of light sneaked across the floor. He groped for the handle, twisted it, and threw open the door. Then froze, his nerves tightening like drawn wires.

His recognition of Gray was immediate, for the man was lying face upwards. There was a pancake stain of crimson on his shirt, and the knife lay a few feet away on the carpet.

" Good lord, he's dead! " Brysten gasped.

Derry moved into the room, but in the instant of reaching Gray's side his eyes caught a movement in the sideboard mirror and he lunged to the alcove, taking measure of his man as he went, grabbing the gun-wrist and smashing it to the wall so that the weapon went flying across the room.

" Grab it, Bill! " he cried, and was gratified to note that Brysten was already diving for it.

Derry spun the intruder across the room and glared at him: a small man, dark-complexioned, with a turned-up nose that gave him the look of a rabbit.

" Keep an eye on him, Bill," Derry said over his shoulder. " I'll get on to the police."

" No, Jeff."

" But we can't leave . . ." The sentence trailed off as he turned. Brysten's face was a granite mask, and he had the gun trained unflinchingly on him.

" Come here, Jackson," he said, and the rabbit-faced man moved to his side. He spoke again to Derry, his voice flat and emotionless. " Pick up that knife, Jeff."

He obeyed, puzzled.

" Hold it tight."

No need to tell me that, Derry thought; he could feel the sweat forming between his hand and the bone handle. When Brysten told him to drop it his hand opened as though burnt, for in that moment he saw the pattern that was being shaped.

" This doesn't make sense," he said mechanically. " What's the score? "

"Believe me I'm sorry, Jeff."

"Save your tears, brother. You could just as easily have killed me on the *Paulette* or the *Michelle*."

Brysten's jaw was working to swallow down the smallest hint of self-reproach. He said almost apologetically, "It's the Organization that matters above all else. Sentiment cannot be allowed to come between orders and duty."

"We're wasting time," the man named Jackson said sharply.

Brysten ignored him and stretched out his hand. At first the insane idea passed through Derry's mind that he was expected to shake hands; but the soft Irish voice said, "I'll relieve you of the incendiary."

Jackson stepped forward with alarm as Derry reached for his pocket, but Brysten knew he had no gun. He caught the sachet neatly as it was tossed to him.

"What's the key that makes sense of it all?" Derry asked. "Communism? Fascism?"

Brysten gave the pretence of a smile. "You've as many 'isms' in your bonnet as Gower. The Organization is working *for* Britain, not against her. A new Britain, federated to a World Government. What we represent is a force that is revolutionary in all meanings of the word; but people are suspicious of new orders, so they must be made to see that what we offer is right."

"You think you can do that by sinking a few tankers?"

"We are not yet strong enough to come into the open," said Brysten. "But strength is comparative. The weaker the opposition, the stronger are we by comparison. We are only at the beginning of a campaign. Multiply the effect of the action on Vogoil a hundredfold in other diverse but equally vital industries and we shall have the results we require."

He passed the gun to Jackson and said quietly, "My car is outside. We'll take the A21 to the coast."

Derry indicated the figure sprawled at his feet. "What about Gray? Was he one of your men?"

"A minor cog."

"And expendable."

"There is no room for carelessness in the Organization," Brysten said as he stepped aside.

Derry felt the brutal blow of the muzzle in his spine and obeyed its unspoken instruction, crossing to the door.

He found himself in the back seat of the car and tried to forget that the pistol clutched in the nervous hand of Jackson was directed to his stomach at fifteen inches. Brysten snaked the car through the deserted streets, but seemed to take an inordinate time to clear the metropolitan area, not speeding for fear of

attracting a patrol car. They crossed the river by Westminster Bridge and headed south-east.

"This is not going to make sense to Gower," Derry ventured. "If I'm to be your scapegoat for sabotage, what happens when the body turns up and the Vogoil boats still keep going down?"

"Your body's not going to turn up," Jackson snapped.

Derry's tongue flicked across his dry lips and he lapsed into silence. He thought, So that's why we're heading for the coast. There must be a boat laid on; and when I go over the side I'll be dressed in enough concrete to keep a whale down.

Camberwell, Peckham, New Cross, Lewisham . . .

Derry noted the districts and told himself he was crazy to sit there like a grade-one dope when he knew he was for the high jump. If he grabbed for the gun there was at least—and at most—a one per cent chance of getting away with it. From the position of the weapon he would most likely be gut-shot. No, he didn't relish it. It was seventy miles to the coast: eighty minutes maybe, and most of them belonged to him.

He waited.

At Catford a black car put the wind up Brysten because it resembled a police car. He was shaken enough to swing off the main road and execute a fast weave through a maze of narrow residential streets before joining the A21 again below Bromley, where they had the road to themselves.

They were making fast time now. The needle left seventy, reached eighty, and made a bid for the nineties. The Kent countryside, brushed fitfully by moonlight, swept by in a ghostly panorama.

There was a sudden change of note as their car over-ran her engine. Derry peered through the windscreen at a car angled across the road ahead with a figure beside it swinging a red lamp. When the big car's headlights picked out the uniform, Brysten swore and slammed the accelerator to the floorboards. The speedometer reading was seventy-five.

Derry started to yell, "You'll never get past . . ." when Brysten swung crazily to the grass verge.

The off-side front wheel bounced a ditch bank and dropped. Brysten wrenched back. The sump sheared. Rubber screamed. She floated and hit and floated again. Then the clean tear of metal . . . and oblivion.

Derry swam upwards into consciousness. He saw the green rim of the screens and above him a towering ceiling of white. The fever is over, was his first thought; the malaria bug has been popped like a flea on a fingernail, and now I can return to the

Paulette Vee. For a moment his mind groped back to the nightmare that had filled his feverish sleep, a nightmare of guilt, and explosions, and crashing cars. He turned and saw the nurse; she was not brown. How does she keep her cheeks so pink out here, he wondered. Lowering his eyes yet further he saw Linda . . . and the key turned.

When the nurse had fussed him, had pushed a cold china spout between his lips to fill his throat with water, and asked him—superfluously—how he felt, she went away.

He looked again at Linda, hard and long. She smiled warmly but said nothing for a while. A tiny flash of light drew his attention to her hands and he saw that she was wearing his solitaire. His pleasure was temporarily outbalanced by a pain that announced itself in his left leg.

" How was I on the trapeze? " His voice was a whisper.

" I'm told it was a somersault and two side rolls; but the car finished up on all four wheels."

" Very sensible." He winced at the shaft of pain when he tried to move his leg. " What's happened down there? "

" Your ankle."

" Busted? "

" In two places."

He thought about it for a while, not liking it much. A floating sensation told him he had only a fingerhold on consciousness. With an effort he asked, " And the others? "

" They're both alive," Linda told him. " With concussion. Brysten has some broken ribs. They found the incendiary and Gower has already started work. He says it's only the beginning of a very big job."

Derry's eyes widened. " But how does he know . . . ? "

She told him, " He's been practically holding your hand for the last twenty-four hours. You've been most talkative."

" I have? "

She nodded, then smiled. " Oh, and he warns me you have quite a seaman's vocabulary."

Derry lay still for a moment, trying to sort out the jumble in his mind. He said eventually, " You know, what beats me is how that squad car got on to us."

" You underestimated the bloodhound. He saw me get out of the taxi without you and followed me up to the flat. When he asked where you were, I said I didn't know what he was talking about—just as you told me—so he marched me off to Gower."

She reached out and took his hand. " When I told him who you'd gone to see he got it into his head that *you* were going to do something dangerous. That's why the police were alerted to

locate and stop Brysten's car—so that they could protect him by arresting you."

"Only a busted leg stops that from being funny."

"Better than a broken neck," she said reproachfully.

His stare fastened to the green rim of the screens, which began to waver like the heat-hazed lip of a volcano. And he was the burning, bubbling core of it.

"I guess," he managed, "it's a small enough discount." The green rim was turning to grey. Curious! Linda was drifting, too, though he could still feel the weight of her hand upon his own. Her arm must be a mile long.

An austere voice said, "You'd better leave now, Miss Marsh."

Derry tried to raise himself in protest. "Wait—something to settle . . ." What was it, now? Ah yes! "Linda—been thinking, Linda—*about us* . . ."

"Yes, Jeff . . .?"

There was no rim now, so he compressed his lips, stemming the words through mistrust . . . His seaman's vocabulary would not fit the occasion. Would not fit it at all well!

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VIEW HALLOO!

Tally-ho, gone away, and thar she blows! Whatever game is your quarry, hunt for it down below, and if you can't find it there, track it along to the solutions on page 115.

1. *Your dear wife asks for a mink tippet, a musquash stole, a nutria cape, and a coney cardigan. You grab your gun and chase after what animals?*

2. *Out hunting on the moors you see a calf, a knobbler, a brocket, a staggard, a hart, and a hummel. What game are you after?*

3. *When does fox-hunting begin? And when does it end?*

4. *Can you identify these animals of story and legend:*
i. Bambi; ii. Reynard; iii. Tarka; iv. Jelly Roll; v. Kotik?

5. *What animal is hunted with beagles; with dachshunds; with borzois?*

6. *When did rabbits first arrive in England? From which country?*

7. *The largest of these deer is: fallow; roe; or red?*

★ ★ ★

When you have read this copy of ARGOSY, why not pass it on to a member of H.M. Forces?

★ *Arthur Gordon, favourite Argosy author—recent hair-raisers include, Height of Danger, Danger Money, Sporting Chance—here takes a lighter flight and demonstrates in an intriguing short-short what happens when Cupid takes the sigh out of cybernetics.*

GIANT BRAIN

BY ARTHUR GORDON

PERHAPS the day had something to do with it: sunlight strewn around like gold-dust, the sky a new-washed blue, with April blowing her warm breath down the necks of all the trees, making them shiver with anticipation.

In any case, the thought pounced on George Honeywell while he was walking to work. "George," it said, silently but unmistakably, "you ought to have a girl."

Young Mr. Honeywell put the thought firmly out of his mind, but it came right back. "Why," it asked, "*don't* you have a girl?"

"You know perfectly well," George answered it sharply, "that I'm in a new job, in a new town, and I've hardly had time . . ."

"Eight weeks," said the voice, "is plenty of time. What's more, United Electronics has several thousand employees, at least half of them female. You've had both the time and the opportunity. What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"It's not that easy," cried George, walking a little faster.

"I don't want just any girl. I want a girl with . . . well, with definite specifications. It's a problem!"

"George," said the voice with a faint sigh, "United Electronics pays you to *solve* problems."

Into the great factory with a somewhat harried air went young Mr. Honeywell. He came to his private office in the advanced research building, closed the door, went over to the window. Outside, on the vast expanse of lawn, three willow trees swayed gracefully. Like hula dancers, George thought dreamily. Or . . .

Abruptly he turned from the window. This would never do. Was he, after all, a scientist or a freshman? He sat down, picked up the sheet of paper that summarized the day's activities. Nine o'clock: conference on the Neptune project. Well, he could skip

that. Nine-fifteen: Atlas available for individual research problems . . . Atlas! George felt his heart give a sudden, undisciplined, and thoroughly unscientific leap. In a nearby office, there it sat, the vast computing machine that could solve in seconds problems that would take a human brain years of patient work. Atlas could evaluate anything. Just give it the components of a problem, and in a matter of seconds its incredible electronic innards would spew forth an infallible answer.

George took out a handkerchief and blotted his forehead. All employees at U.E., he knew, filled in elaborate questionnaires. All this information was available. It could be fed, instantaneously, to Atlas. So if you wanted a caretaker, or a director . . .

With horror George Honeywell looked down at the scrap pad on his desk. His right hand had already written down one set of specifications: *36-24-36*. He blushed and hastily crossed that out. Much too—well, too specific. But his pencil was going merrily on.

Sex: female. Age: 21. Marital status: single. Eyes: brown. Hair: blonde. Height: five feet five. Weight: 8 stones. Education: B.Sc. Personality: extrovert. Interests: music, tennis, dancing. Hobbies . . .

With a groan, George Honeywell pushed the pad away. This was madness. As a research scientist, he had the right to use Atlas for any purpose, it was true. But the giant's brain-time was worth thousands of pounds a minute. If it ever came to light that . . . George shuddered and closed his eyes.

Instantly he saw the willow trees dancing on the lawn, and slowly they changed to hula girls, complete with green grass-skirts. Without opening his eyes, he groped for the phone.

"Get me Computing," he said hoarsely. And a moment later, "Computing? This is George Honeywell, Room 73. I think I'm going to need—ah—an assistant. Run a personnel check through Atlas for me, please. Yes, I have the specifications ready. Yes, right away. Thanks."

He sat, frozen, waiting for the office boy's step in the corridor outside. When he heard it, he grew so panicky that he almost tore up the list. But then he realized that there was a simpler way to negate the whole thing. He could ask Atlas for something unobtainable. Feverishly he seized his pencil, and as the office boy came in he scribbled: *Hobbies: bird-watching and crocheting.* He folded the paper and handed it to the boy. There, he thought, let Atlas try to make something out of that!

The reply came back from Computing in exactly twenty minutes. It came in the form of a rather prim-looking young woman with hornrimmed glasses and dark hair.

"Mr. Honeywell," she said, "I'm afraid there's only one employee who fits your requirements to any extent. I have the card here, if you'd care to look."

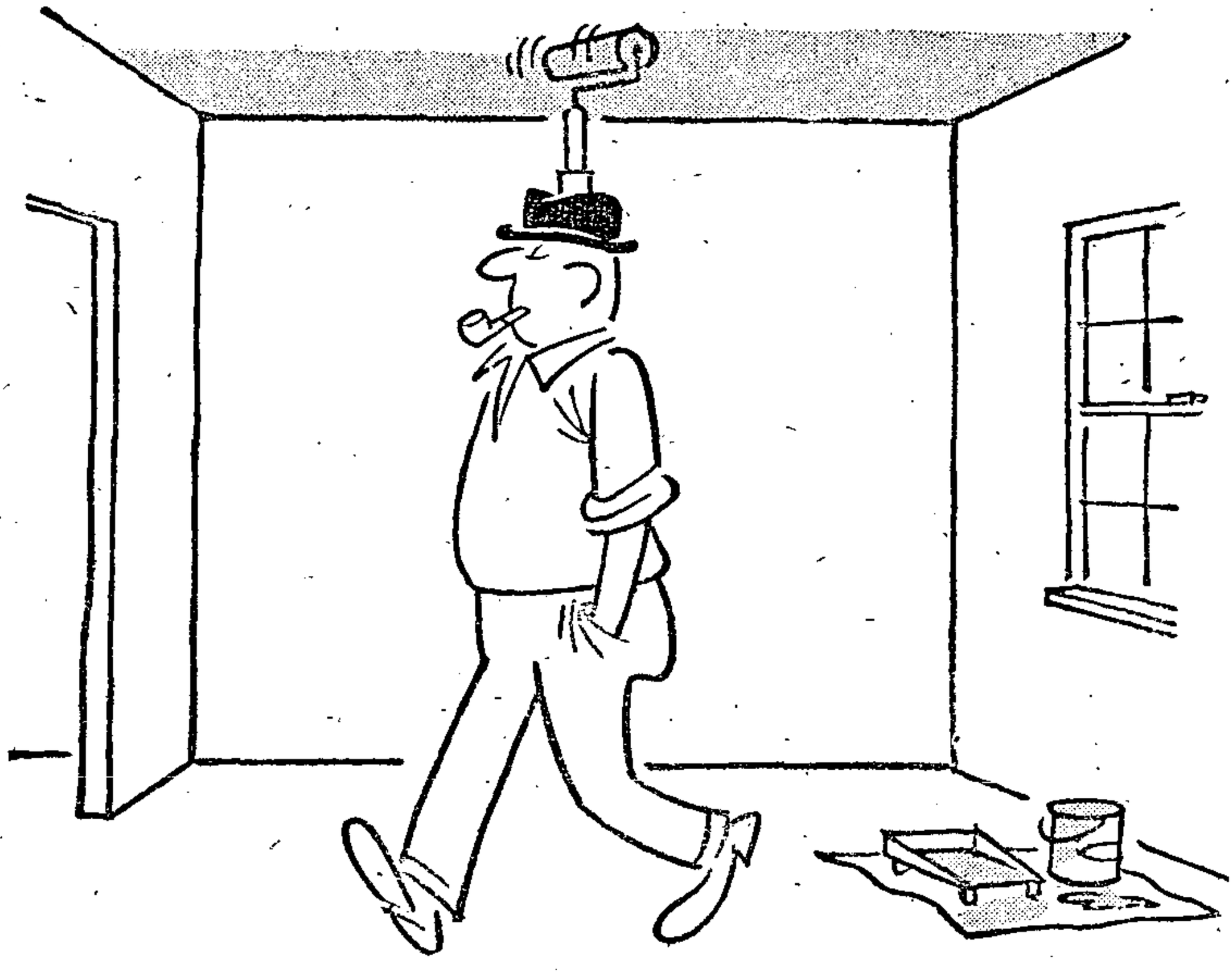
She held out the cardboard rectangle. George took it, scanned it quickly.

"But this is all wrong," he said indignantly. "I mean, Atlas must have made a mistake! I asked for a brown-eyed blonde. This girl has black hair and blue eyes, and she works in Computing, and she . . . and she . . ."

He looked up, speechless. The hornrimmed glasses had come off, and he found himself looking into the bluest, merriest pair of eyes he had ever seen.

"And she doesn't crochet," said the girl, "and she doesn't watch birds. But she's new in town, like you, Mr. Honeywell. And she knows how you feel, because once a year she feels that way herself. When it's April, when it's spring . . ."

So that's how George Honeywell found himself a girl, and he has had an undying affection for Atlas ever since. But if you ask Mrs. Honeywell about the giant brain that brought them together, she gives you a modest answer. "Oh, it wasn't so giant," she says happily. "It was just mine!"



MIND'S EYE MYSTERY

"Judy," he exclaimed, "what is it? What's the matter?"

BY MARGERY ALLINGHAM

"MY dear Judith, it's the name I don't like to hear. I can't bear you using it. I realize you can't be talking about the same Laurie Butler, but if you're going to marry him, or even bring him home here, you'll have to call him Laurence."

Mother, who is round and charming and normally reasonable, had the grace to blush as she regarded me through the looking-glass above her dressing-table, but her eyes were frosty.

"I'm sorry," she continued, "but that was the name of the child who killed Dorinda. She was your father's only sister and he worshipped her. I daresay the story is ancient history to you, but to your father and me it's only twenty-five years ago, and that isn't terribly long when you're fifty, as you'll find out one day."

As I stood behind her I could see my startled face hovering in the dark mirror above her head. She and I are not very alike. I am tall and skinny, with my father's Scottish colouring, and my cropped hair looked flippant above her regular grey waves. She was bluffing, of course. I realized that, but I was shocked to see how much she cared.

I tried to make her understand. "It's the same person, darling. He was only eight years old then and he's thirty-three now. He's grown into the best man I ever met. I don't know if I'll marry him because he hasn't asked me yet, but I do know I want to." I sounded breathless and even a little unsteady. I had not admitted quite so much to myself before. In the looking-glass I saw her bleak expression give place to a worried one.

"Oh, Judy," she said helplessly. "How perfectly awful, darling! What are we going to say to your father?"

I did not answer. It was a question I had been pondering ever since I stepped onto the train which would bring me home to Meade for the weekend. I was at the university, on a refresher course, and even up there, where 1933 is apt to seem as remote as 1066, the position had appeared to be a little awkward—or

indelicate, rather. But home here at Meade, where it had all taken place, the atmosphere was very different. I saw that it could well seem rather shocking to the home folk that I should want to marry Laurie, of all men in the world. I believe that at that moment, if it hadn't been for the memory of his hurt face and shadowed eyes, I would have abandoned my course at the University Hospital, where we had met, and never gone back.

I am a child psychiatrist and I take my job with a passionate seriousness which would be rather a bore if the subject weren't so desperately important. It was the reason why I had gone out of my way to get to know Laurie while I was working in the hospital where he was one of a brilliant team of research chemists. I knew who he was, and I was interested to see what effect the experience in his childhood had had on him.

I walked into it with my eyes open. The instant we met I was lost. When Laurie and I first saw each other something happened to both of us. There is only one thing certain about those cheerful idiots who inquire if one believes in love at first sight, and that is that they have never experienced it. It is not a phenomenon which leaves room for any doubt.

After our first meeting Laurie and I managed to see each other all the time when we weren't actually working. We talked about every subject under the sun except two. We did not mention the shooting—although the shadow of it hung between us like a sheet of glass—and we did not talk of love. After a few weeks the position was unbearable and I fled to spend a couple of nights at home with the laudable idea of trying to clarify my mind. The clearer it became, the more wretched I grew.

The story of Dorinda's death was one of those mysteries whose solution appears only too obvious from the very beginning. In 1933 my father had been one of the more popular doctors in Meade. Laurie's father, Sam Butler, was the County Architect. I was a few months old and Laurie himself was a child. We lived near each other.

Dorinda was just nineteen, and beautiful. She had come to spend the summer with us, partly to help Mother with me and partly to take a share in the social season which in that pre-war time was gay enough to attract any young girl. From the outset she was a tremendous success. I grew up with a child's belief that she was the most dazzling heroine of romance who had ever lived but, if not quite that, it does appear that she was unusually pretty, popular, and vivacious.

The whole town was shaken when tragedy overtook her. Early one evening, about eight weeks after her arrival, her body was found in a meadow by the river on the outskirts of the town.

She had been shot at close range with a light sporting gun which lay in the grass a few yards from the body. Our family punt, in which she had been seen alone earlier in the day, was tied up to some willows nearby.

The police identified the gun very quickly. It belonged to Mr. Butler. He and his wife were away for the weekend, but Laurie had been left behind in the care of a housekeeper and already he had been punished for shooting without permission. He had told several people that he wanted to bag a water-rat. After that, it was only a matter of hours before they discovered witnesses who had actually seen him trotting down to the water-meadows in the hot afternoon, the gun under his arm.

The inspector in charge of the case was a family man himself and it was said that the business broke his heart. He talked to Laurie and made up his mind that it had been an accident, and that the child was too frightened to own up. He thought the boy had been showing the gun to the girl when the shot was fired, and he did everything he could to make him admit it.

Unfortunately Laurie had a different story and nothing would make him alter it. He agreed that he had taken the gun, knowing that he was doing wrong, and that he had gone down to the river to wait for a rat. He was in position, he explained, crouched down by a tree stump, when Dorinda came along in her boat, singing, and strumming on a ukulele. He called to her, asking her to be quiet and not to scare the rat, but he thought he frightened her, for she turned very red, he said, and was furious with him. She brought the punt to the bank and asked Laurie if his father knew that he was out shooting. Laurie had to confess that he did not, whereupon she insisted that he gave her the gun at once before he did any harm with it. He was not enthusiastic, naturally, but she was grown-up and quite capable of telling his parents, so finally he gave way. He parted with his prize and, according to him, the last time he saw it was lying in the bottom of the punt as Dorinda sped away downstream. After that, he said, there was no point in waiting, so he came home and played in the garden until supper-time.

It was an inconclusive tale, highly unsatisfactory in the circumstances. The hideous fact remained, Dorinda was dead. No one believed Laurie. Sympathy for both families was very great in the town and the Coroner's court brought in an open verdict. After a while Sam Butler resigned his job and the family moved elsewhere.

As far as I could gather afterwards, our family behaved very well, but my father never made any bones about his beliefs. For him there was no mystery. Dorinda had been the victim of a

tragic accident, and the Butler boy was a dangerous young liar with bad blood in him somewhere. So there it was.

I looked at Mother. "You don't think Father's attitude may have mellowed?" I began half-heartedly, but she silenced me.

"I know it hasn't. He was speaking about it only the other day. He surprised me. He's still very bitter about the lying. He feels that if only the child had been made to own up it would have settled things once and for all, and there wouldn't have been all the talk about the poor girl afterwards."

"Talk?" I murmured, surprised. "I thought she was supposed to be the complete innocent."

"Oh well, of course she was." Mother's round face grew even pinker. "No one could criticize her when she was dead, dear." She paused, honesty compelling her, no doubt, and added unexpectedly, "To be truthful, she was something of a nightmare to me. I was only six years older, you see, and I couldn't begin to manage her. Girls were wild in those days. However, don't you dare to repeat that. Your father would never forgive me."

"I won't," I said hastily, but she had made me curious. "What brought the subject up? You noticed that paragraph in the paper about Laurie's experiments, I suppose."

"No, darling, I'm afraid I didn't." With extreme delicacy she managed to convey that while being on my side she still didn't like to hear the tabooed name on my lips. "We heard on the news that John Ryder, the painter, had died somewhere down in Cornwall, and we began to talk about him. He and his wife were staying at the Johnsons' cottage down here when it all happened. He was very struck with Dorinda and he had asked your father if she could sit for him. There was some talk that the portrait might be hung in the Royal Academy and we were all wildly excited about it." She caught my eye and laughed. "We were a very ordinary lot of provincials, I'm afraid. Oh, Judy, my dear, you're horridly right, it *is* a long time ago."

I kissed her and let the matter drop. Both she and Father are darlings, but their life in a small country town has not made them exactly flexible in outlook. With the years, to put it mildly, their ideas have tended to become set. Meantime my own predicament had not grown any easier. I found I was searching my heart almost eagerly to see if I was missing Laurie any less, which was absurd. He filled my whole world and there was never going to be any escape from him. I felt that in my bones.

I assumed that Mother had decided to let well alone and would ignore our conversation, but I was wrong. On the Sunday

evening I broke my necklace while undressing for bed, and was grovelling for stray pearls under a little Victorian couch, when she came in with an envelope in her hand.

"Look, Judy," she began, sounding faintly conspiratorial, although Father could hardly have heard her down three flights of stairs, "this is what I meant about Dorinda. See how lovely she was and how—well, how wild." She sat down on the couch, opened the envelope, and shook out two photographs. I knelt beside her and turned them over curiously. They were snapshots but they had been printed on square sheets of paper with official-looking hieroglyphics printed under them. Each was a picture of the same girl in different poses, one very much clearer than the other. I saw that she had been a raving beauty of the period, very much more made up than we are today, and that her attitude as she sat on the grass, looking up and smiling, was certainly provocative.

The other photograph, although taken at the same time, since the dress and background were the same, was very blurred. One could only just make out her shadowed face as she leaned back against a tree trunk, the leaves making patterns across her distinctive white dress with a scalloped hem.

"You can guess she was a handful," Mother went on. "There were such a lot of men about just then. Young husbands and old ones too. I had quite a time one way and another. The wives always came to me."

I could imagine that they would. It would hardly be any use going to the young baggage in the photograph. I felt I was getting a new angle both on Dorinda and on my mother. I turned the pictures over.

"What are these?" I asked. "Exhibits at the Coroner's court?"

"I suppose they must be," she agreed. "The police gave them to your father when the case was closed. They were found in her camera, which was lying beside her in the grass. Two exposures had been made, so the police developed the film. That was her new dress. She was wearing it for the first time that day. See the scalloped hem? That's how they knew when the snap was taken. She'd only had the dress on for those three hours before she died."

"Really?" That was a piece of data I'd never heard. "Did they discover who took these?"

"Oh, they were certain the boy did. I don't think he admitted it, but it was quite obvious that he met Dorinda and that they talked, and she asked him to snap her.

"Then he started showing her his gun, and of course it went off. I always blamed the parents. Just fancy going away for a

weekend and leaving a gun where a child could reach it!"

I hardly heard her. I was looking at the photograph of the lovely face smiling so invitingly at the camera. The curve of the full throat was sensuous and the shape of the swelling breast just apparent under the silk dress.

"Have I seen this before?" I demanded. "I think I have."

"You may have done, dear. That was the one the police reproduced everywhere on the off chance that someone would come forward to say they'd seen the two together that afternoon. The other wouldn't reproduce. No one did come forward, though. My word, she was a pretty girl, wasn't she?"

"Staggering, as far as I can see by these," I said, and handed them back to her.

She studied them again, and began to talk as people do about old photographs. "If only this one had come out properly you'd see what I mean so much better," she rambled on. "It wasn't only her appearance. I don't suggest there was any harm in her but she did like to provoke people. This second picture shows that, if you study it; but it's no good, the negative was over-exposed and I should say the child moved when he took it. All the same," she added brightly, "I do believe those old box cameras took better pictures than the very expensive new ones."

"They were more foolproof, certainly," I murmured absently. I was still bothered by the first picture, the one the police had reproduced. Something about it had struck me as being curious, but for the life of me I couldn't define it. Mother cut into my thoughts by suddenly gathering her papers and rising.

"I don't hold it against the boy," she said in a sudden burst of confidence, "but, oh my pet, do get over it if you can. It's irrevocable, you see. At this distance nothing is true about a thing like that except what people believe. Your father and I could forgive the boy but we could never get it out of our heads that he's naturally careless and tells lies. It isn't only us, either. The case made quite a sensation. You'll find everyone of our age or older will feel exactly the same way about it. Your connection with it just turns it into a story people will want to tell."

She was right: I could see that.

She went out, leaving me so flattened that I did not notice until later that she had left the second photograph—the bad one—on the couch. Without thinking, I put it in my handbag.

I went back to the hospital and work, and for a few more days Laurie and I kept up our pretence. I did not broach the subject because I was terrified lest anything should shatter the dream in which I seemed to be wandering, but in the end matters came to a head. It happened almost casually, as such things often do.

We had been for a long walk together and had come back through one of the pretty villages just outside the university town. As we crossed a stone bridge over the river we paused to look down at the shallow water hurrying over the pebbles. I remember thinking that the spot was traditionally romantic and that Laurie was downright conventionally handsome. I laid my hand on the parapet and he dropped his own over it.

"Oh, my dear girl," he said, in probably the most unromantic way such a declaration was ever dragged out of a man, "this can't go on. I shall be sick."

Fortunately I laughed so much it did not matter that my eyes were watering. "That's exactly how I feel," I said.

He did not speak at once but went on holding my hand very tightly. Finally he turned me to face him. "How idiotic that it had to be us," he said. "You and me, I mean. You think I killed that aunt of yours, don't you?"

It was not at all what I had expected and I was unpardonably clumsy. "My dear," I said, "no one could blame a child of eight who—"

"That's not what I asked you, Judy. You've answered me, all the same. You think I shot her. So does everybody else in the world."

I stared at him and for the first time doubt concerning the question entered my mind. As it did so I realized what it was that had struck me as being so odd about the snapshot Mother had shown me. Of course he had not done it; I saw it now.

"D'you mean to say you didn't?" I demanded.

He gave me a queer sidelong glance under his lashes. "I wish I thought I had," he said deliberately. "Unfortunately I don't. I never did. That makes me odd man out. Judy, if I shot that girl I did it in a brainstorm, and ever since I've been terrified I'd have another."

I felt my heart turn over in my chest, I was so appalled by the revelation. The agony the child must have suffered!

"Darling," I exclaimed involuntarily, "it's a miracle you stood it. Of course, of course you didn't kill her! She was going to meet somebody. That's why she was angry when you appeared on the bank so inopportunely."

He stared. "That's what my father tried to believe. What put it into your head?"

"The photograph." The words came out of my mouth before even I realized their full inference. "That girl wasn't smiling up at a *child* when that snapshot was taken."

He frowned. "Wasn't she? I don't really remember the photograph. I know there was one and I recall a rather kindly

old copper trying to persuade me to say that I took it. But it didn't mean a thing to me. I was simply sticking to what I believed was the truth. Never, at any point in my life, have I been able to remember anything different from that story I told the police, yet now it does seem that if there had been any other possible explanation they would have discovered it. That's the mischief of the whole wretched situation. Nothing can ever be proved, and after all this time it's what everybody believes that is the reality." They were so nearly Mother's words all over again that I felt a wave of sheer dismay pass over me.

"But it's all wrong," I burst out, stammering in my excitement. "It's—it's monstrous! Don't let it make any difference to us, Laurie. Please, darling, that would be wicked."

I heard him catch his breath. "You're the sweetest thing, Judy. I love you. I want to ask you to marry me more than anything in the world, but I shan't because I know I couldn't stand the publicity all over again and I don't think you could."

"Publicity—" I began contemptuously, but he cut me short.

"You've no idea what it's like. It's not the paragraphs in the newspapers, or even the re-hashing of the whole dreary story which can only have the same hopelessly indeterminate conclusion—either I'm a liar or a lunatic. It's the letters from people one's never heard of."

"Good heavens," I ejaculated, "surely they didn't write to you as a child?"

"Not to me; but to my people." He was bitter. "My father and mother were driven almost to suicide. People wrote condoling, or censuring, or suggesting idiotic solutions. Some were spiteful, some were ostensibly well-meaning, but they were all utterly relentless. I tell you, the public's reaction to a story which takes its fancy is fearsome. It can shake you up horribly, especially if you don't know whether you are guilty or not."

I said nothing. I was both scandalized and scared. Also I loved him so much that the prospect of losing him made me feel faint. "Are you sure people would still be interested after all this time?" I ventured at last.

He grimaced. "Some hardly need a reminder. Last week, as you know, there were a couple of paragraphs about this job I'm on in two very solid and respectable journals. Today I got a cutting from the *Meade Courier* quoting them and then recalling the whole of the old story; while three or four days ago there was an illiterate note from some woman in Cornwall saying that her lodger, who had just died, had painted a picture of the 'lady you shot as a little boy' and asking me if I would like to buy it as 'he always said you ought to have it.' No, Judy, once

our names are linked together we'd pull a hornets' nest about our ears and yet—oh my darling, what can we do?"

I put my arm through his possessively. "Tell me about the woman in Cornwall. The lodger was John Ryder, I suppose."

"That's the man." He held my arm tightly against him as we strode on down the road together. "He was visiting Meade at the time. I don't really remember him so well as I do his wife, who was a terrifying piece of work, Spanish or something, jealous as the devil. He was quite a well-known painter then, although I can't say I've heard of him since. All the same, it shows you how even disinterested people talk. It must be the element of mystery which fascinates them. Did the wretched child pull the trigger or didn't he? Unluckily, in this case there can never be any proof."

"Someone might confess," I suggested half-heartedly.

"After twenty-five years? It's not very likely." His quick smile faded and long wrinkles appeared on his forehead.

"Even so, you know, I think both the police and I would need more than a mere statement to set all doubt at rest. Proof is the necessary item, Judy, cast-iron irrefutable proof. At this stage in the proceedings it's just not possible."

The word lay heavily between us for the rest of the walk home. I saw his point only too vividly. I was remembering the attitude of my own people. I had never felt so helplessly miserable.

All the rest of the day I turned the matter over and over in my mind, and by evening I was in the mood to catch at the flimsiest of straws. Laurie and I were in his study listening to some records when the idea that had been nagging me suddenly took shape. I got to my feet. "Look," I announced, "I'm going to Cornwall to see that picture. Will you drive me?"

To my relief he laughed. I'd been afraid he might be angry.

"Anywhere in the world," he assured me. "There's nothing I'd like better. But if it's merely a matter of morbid curiosity I can satisfy that instantly. The lady sent the picture on approval with the letter. I hardly looked at it. It's in that cupboard, still in brown paper, ready to be returned."

We went across the room together and carried the square flat parcel to the table under the light. Laurie pulled off the wrappings and put his arm round my shoulders as we stood looking down at a canvas perhaps twenty inches square. The moment I saw it I stood transfixed, staring at it incredulously, hardly conscious of Laurie's voice continuing in the quiet room. When at last I got hold of myself and turned to him he was still talking about the painter and his landlady.

"She didn't actually say so but I gather he was definitely odd

at the end of his life," he was saying. "She wrote something about his painting this picture over and over again, and making her promise to give it to me when he died. But, as she points out, since he owed her nearly a year's board she thought she was justified in trying for a sale. His wife must have vanished some time ago. There's no mention of her. It's not a bad, old-fashioned, factual painting. What do you say? Shall I buy it and justify the landlady's faith in writing letters to strangers?"

On the last word he looked round at me and caught sight of my expression. "Why, Judy," he exclaimed, "what is it? What's the matter? You look as though you've seen a ghost."

"I—I have," I said huskily. "Laurie, this is *it*. This is the answer. This is the confession and the proof."

"Proof? Darling, what on earth are you talking about? This is only a portrait of Dorinda. I can't even remember if it's very like her. I thought of her as being older and more—more staid than this. There's no significance here."

"Isn't there!" I exploded. "You don't understand. This is *the* picture, the one which didn't come out properly, the one the police couldn't reproduce because the negative was too bad. Don't you see, *he knew he had taken it*. He knew it was not only in the camera but in his own mind's eye. That's why he wanted you to have it. John Ryder shot Dorinda. One can easily guess why. She was terribly reckless and he had a jealous termagant of a wife. This is his confession. Moreover," I added, looking up into his disbelieving face, "as it happens, I can prove it." And I opened my handbag.

It was terrifying. The two pictures were nearly identical. In each the shadow of the leaves made the same pattern on the white skirt with the telltale scalloped hem which fixed the time of wearing. But, whereas in the photograph the face was lost in shadow, in the painting it was unbearably vivid. Every provocative line was clearly emphasized and there was no doubt whatever about the mingled fear and attraction which the painter had felt for that impish face for ever imprinted on his memory.

Laurie stood looking at the two for some time and then suddenly he put his arms round me.

"My God, Judy," he said, and he sounded afraid. "I thought I'd suffered, but what a hell it must have been for him!"

I made no comment. How could I, with his lips over mine?

★ ★ ★

SOME DAY MY PRINTS WILL COME

Nowadays when a woman waits for a man to come along, he's probably delivering bread, milk, or mail.

ROSE OF SOOCHOW

She glowed in the indoor storm-dusk
like gold

BY ROBERT WILSON

THAT night they lay in ambush on the track. Morning found them in the chest-high sedge, feet in an ooze of brown bog-water. The familiar metal of the gun in Bane's hands was a dull shine, the butt gleaming where the heat brought out a sweat of oil.

Bane's glance took in the rifleman crouched on his right. He thought: I can cover the length of the track up to the turn. He looked through the contrived window of branches and wished that they would come, two or three or four, almost carelessly, walking without suspicion in the late morning.

He touched the sweated stubble of his jaw, feeling the night stiffness that invaded his arm up to the shoulder. Tired in the damp cocoon of his clothes, he thought in succession of Lyn and the comfort of her body and the oppression of the noon forest and so back to the numbing discipline of the ambush.

One more hour, then I give up.

He gazed down the track and the clock of his mind ticked back to Lyn. He thought, If she walked out of the vert, sap-oozing jungle, walked into this ambush with a damask rose in her black hair, then I would take her hand and lead her to the place where the Argus pheasant dances. We would watch the spider-eater hunt in the wild banana with his bill a scimitar and I would find it hard to breathe, not from watching him but from love of her. She is the wine of life, flowing like a tide through the valleys and ridges of my weaknesses and my strength.

Mike Bane, a landscape inundated.

When I first saw her she was buying vegetables in a Singapore market. I often go out of my way to walk through markets, and on that day I got up at six and went down through the Chinese streets bannered with washing out of the upper storey windows. I watched the boatmen on the river behind Raffles Square and then I wandered among the market stalls. We'd just done four months up-country in the Bongsu Forest Reserve looking for Communist terrorists and now the battalion was back in garrison.

I had two weeks' leave. I knew what I wanted to do, but I hadn't made up my mind where to go. I was casting around in Singapore and I'd been there only one night. I soaked up the colours and smells of the market and I was glad to be out of the Bongsu. Too much jungle and too few bandits.

I was quite close when I saw her leaning over the bright mat of vegetables on a stall counter, and her neck between the high collar and crescent of her hair was so fresh and cool and innocent that my heart came into my mouth and I stopped where I could watch her.

She was lovely. She was like a delicately erotic Beardsley drawing made oriental. My mind was going like a mill-race and in five seconds flat I had met her, fallen in love with her, and gone to bed with her, all in my imagination.

She wore a white cheongsam with the usual slit in the side running up to four inches above her knee. Her legs were as flawless as the rest of her. The soft swell of her breasts and the line of her throat coming out of the high braided collar made my eyes sting with tears. I'd been too long in the Bongsu all right. She put a spell on me.

I pulled out a five-dollar note and waved it at the old Chinese woman behind the stall. I said, " Amah, fruit; pineapples." I hoped there were no pineapples on the stall and I hoped the girl spoke English. I was sure the old woman didn't.

I began to make a show of searching the stall. I put a lot of vitality into it like a damned court jester, and a European in that market was a curiosity so that a crowd gathered and we all had a fine time, me searching and the old woman exclaiming, and the crowd clucking and chuckling at the mad foreigner, and the children dancing from one foot to the other, and no one with an idea what I was looking for.

It worked. She was smiling. She said, " I think you may find pineapples farther down."

" So you do speak English. I don't really need pineapples. I'd rather look at you. You are the loveliest flower in this garden."

She was a little surprised, but amused. She touched her cheek with the tip of one finger in a way she has. " But this is a market."

" Not any longer, you've made it a garden."

She laughed. " That is a very un-English compliment."

" I'm an unusual Englishman; I say what I think."

" Flattering, but not patriotic. It is very kind of you. Now I must go."

" I haven't finished being floral yet." I took her paper bag of vegetables from the counter and waited while she paid the old

woman. She was still smiling. The princess and the jester. She held out her hands for the bag.

" Don't ask me to leave," I said, anticipating her, " you need me to carry the vegetables. The sun will be a sword in half an hour. Where to? "

" I'm going to Sin Kuong Street, to a locksmith's. You may walk with me if you wish, it isn't far."

" Love laughs at locksmiths."

She gave me a long cool stare. " I know the proverb, it's an English proverb." So we stood and looked at each other in the market place. It was a poor joke. Her manner held a faint challenge and the jester had given place to the courtier.

I said slowly, with a sort of measured conviction, " I mean that it is impossible to look at you without thinking of something as delicately beautiful as a Soochow rose."

She laughed then and clapped her hands together in delight. " Why Soochow? "

" China's beautiful women are mostly from Soochow."

" You shall certainly take me to the locksmith after that."

I put the vegetables under my arm. I'd have carried the stall along for her if she'd wanted it. Everything in the market place was bright with promise and the sun sparkle off the river was a firework burst in my eyes. If the golden oranges on the fruit stalls had got up and chimed like the bells of heaven I wouldn't have been surprised.

We walked side by side in the shade that the buildings of the street laid out in a carpet before us, and I couldn't stop looking at her. The shops were all open by then, as if a knife had sliced through the length of the street spilling basket-weavers, wreath-makers, cooks, tailors, and tinkers on to the pavement at our feet. In the busy street, there was enough within sight to make a world of that one moment.

From princess and courtier I had to change the plane of the encounter and turn it into princess and lover. Not the least of my difficulties was a hangover straight out of a treatise on remorse. After four dry months in the Bongsu, I had found myself the night before with a king among thirsts. I had indulged it. Massed bands marched through my head and the sun whipped up nausea as the sap rises in a tree. Behind my braggart trumpetings in the market place, behind the pantherine tread and the lean, hard, soldierly look was a small voice that demanded a drink. I stopped at a coffee-shop on the next corner. I said, " Let's take the vegetables in here and drink something cold."

She made no objection, probably for the sake of peace, and we went inside. We must have looked very domestic; courtship with

a burden of groceries. A Chinese boy brought a sedate fresh lime for her and a lager for me. I felt like Prometheus with the vultures at his entrails, but the beer restored me.

"That was good," I said. "My name, by the way, is Michael Bane." She sipped her drink and said nothing. She had an air of abstraction, a musing that I hoped had me for its centre. Likely, but by no means certain. I tried again.

"The idea was to make you talk about yourself."

She ran the tip of her forefinger along the line of one cheekbone: Portia contemplating the Jew's bond. I leaned forward and put my hand on hers. She took her hand back after a moment, but it made no difference. "Tell me your name," I said, "and I will take you out to breakfast, or swimming, or to the botanical gardens; whatever you wish and wherever you wish. I don't feel as if we had just met. I should hate it if you got up and walked away."

This time she replied. "It happens that I have nothing to do for the rest of the morning so I will not walk away, not yet, at any rate. My name is Min Lyn Kuo, usually Lyn. It is still necessary to get to the locksmith before twelve."

I don't remember much of what was said in the coffee-shop. I remember every detail of the scene around us, but not the words. The words meant nothing at first.

I remember a Chinese child like a doll; lap-reared, deified as Chinese children are, like a tinkling shrine among the incense of tapers in the roots of a wayside tree, he watched us in hip-straddled complacency across his mother's neck. I remember an old Chinaman, with a hat-trick chin and corrugated flesh down to his knees and pregnant with at least the moon by the breadth of his belly. The eyes in his cannon-ball head had lids to them like stone half circles and he ate noodles with the indifference of the armadillo, sitting as one who sits on a lotus.

I remember the child and the old man and the dust in the sun's beams like a halted dream. I loved her there and then, and we did not go to the locksmith that day, or any day after.

I have never remembered to ask her what she wished to unlock, but I bought her a gold key on a gold chain, and she wore it round her neck for the rest of our two weeks together. It was a perfect token in the circumstances. She'll be wearing it when I get back.

When I get back. When this operation ends. A week? Perhaps; unless we get them today. Reputations in Malaya are made on the jungle tracks. Sooner or later, tired or in a hurry the enemy uses a track and you kill him, in ambush.

I've had my share of luck. They are the paths of glory, but this

one is more important, to me I mean, than all the others. This rat-creep under a blocked-out sky, this tunnel, this ten-yard pig track can get me back to Lyn a week earlier. If they come down the track and we kill them, then the operation is over.

Let them come.

I hired a flat five miles out on the Bukit Timah road. It cost a fortune, but I was rich with unspent pay after the Bongsu. On the day we began living together I drove along Bukit Timah in an open car and black molten clouds arched over the city behind us. The clouds would not wait and we roared through the drenching rain, heads down behind the windscreen with the wind buffeting the breath out of us.

At the flat we stood helpless with laughter when we looked at each other. We were soaked. She wore a cheongsam the colour of rubies, but her lips surpassed rubies. Her lovely black hair was a jet tangle, and she glowed in the indoor storm-dusk like gold. She looked about sixteen. We laughed until the tears came and I loved her for that, too.

We worked on the two rooms and the long second-storey balcony to make the place habitable. We measured the half-wild garden for its flowers and brought every day frangipani and the yellow jungle bindweed like beauty rationed into our rooms. I picked the first flowers after the storm that day.

At the edge of the garden, where it ran into wilderness, I found the waterfall. It was the centrepiece of a miniature grotto that some Chinese had built. I had seen it before with the just-escaped knowledge that hangs on the edge of your mind and I sat down on the stream bank to trace the recollection back. It wasn't difficult.

In India, in the Kulu valley twelve years ago I had been stranded with my rifle company when the Beas river ran wild in the monsoon and swept the road away. On the track that followed the river running up to Manali I met a sadhu. He was near-naked and caked with the grey ashes of his trade and he sat upright on a boulder at the place where I stopped to drink. He said, without looking at me, "A rupee. I will tell you for a rupee a thing that you ought to know."

I swilled my face in the river and I laughed. The gambit was as old as time. India was full of soothsayers. I stood up and loosened my pack. I had time to spare. I said, "Tell me, brother."

He walked across the rocks. He put a grey hand on my arm and looked with his hawk stare into my eyes. He said, "First, when you wish to look no longer, look into the sky and you will

see a waterfall between cliffs. Then look again and you will see a path."

His eyes were as empty as fire. I had no sensation of being under an influence outside myself. I was amused and indifferent. After a minute I grew tired of his locked gaze and I looked away into the sky.

I saw a waterfall. It was a white fall of water tinctured with green and it fell between granite cliffs. Then the picture faded inwards from the blue edge of the sky, and a track under green trees appeared briefly and was gone. There was nothing left but space.

The trick impressed me. It impresses me now. I gave him his rupee after that. I offered him more, but he said he had no more to tell.

He went off down the valley. I never saw him again but I remember him, and this waterfall made by a forgotten gardener was the picture I had seen in the sky, with my eyes or the sadhu's. I do not know. I've seen my share of jungle tracks in eight years of operations; any one of them may have been the path I saw in the sky. But this waterfall was the fall he showed me.

I sat on the grass and thought about it, not without a certain unease. The soldier with suspicion at his shoulder had come back into my holiday. If it was a warning, a warning of what?

I went in to Lyn with my hands full of flowers. Sadhu or no sadhu I make my own pictures.

We lay together in the same long chair at dusk on the balcony and the traffic beyond the canal was far enough away to be a sigh. She had small regard for soldiers, she told me, although she had known only two; I was one and the other, in a fashion, was her husband. It was a day of surprises. I had not known that she was married.

"He went underground when the emergency began," she said. "I have notes from him, two messages this year. I don't even know what he does in the jungle. He fought the Japanese in the occupation so I think he will be a soldier. Do you not wonder how I dare tell you all this?"

I suppose the thought should have occurred to me as an official hunter of those who went underground. She did not love him, that was the important thing for me. The police had never bothered her. It was unlikely that they would in Singapore.

"I do not love him," she said. "Who could love a man eight years in the jungle?"

And for me? What does she feel for me when I am in the jungle and she is in the city?

Waking at dawn with her by my side still far away in sleep.

Flowers made sensitive by her touch are in a bowl at the bedside. A house-coat of gong-loud gold that she wore last night points the unambition of my prosaic shirt where they lie together on a chair. The wall is a white wall with the wash of the sea behind it, with the carpet of the forest beyond it going up to the hills of the North. I am every landscape I have loved when I lie in the half world between sleep and awakening. I am pent with impatience that she should see all beautiful things that I have seen, but with me; a love gift seen through my eyes.

When she woke her hand caressed the morning stubble of my jaw and she moved into my arms like the last refuge. We went over the edge of the world in a slow glissade of love. It was revelation, the turned page that discloses the forgotten word. Until I knew that, I knew nothing.

We had two weeks together and then I had to leave. She said, "Tell me where you are going, it is easier for me if I know where."

I couldn't tell her. The operation was secret. The thought of leaving her was a bleak wind blowing on a ruined and lonely road It still is.

"Unless I know where you are I will imagine bad things."

I could testify to the quality of her imagination. I had told her more stories than Othello told Desdemona and she understood the beauty and the monotony of operations in the jungle almost as if she'd been there. Some of the questions she asked could not be answered, like this one.

"All I know is that I should be back in two weeks."

Lying here in this ambush I know that she will not walk out of the jungle. The play I make with my thoughts is a relaxation of tension, a sort of escape. But I know, equally, that nothing is strong enough to take her away from me.

Let them come. Then I go back to her.

The still and silent waiting of the ambushers on the track was part of the quiet of earth and forest, a brown-green silence. A great moth lay like a spread fan on the ridged bark of the tree that gave cover to Bane and the gun.

The ambush waited like a halted film.

One moment there was nothing but the narrow path then, in the next, Bane watched a figure in khaki come round the bend, brushing with care the scattered screen of the leaves, putting foot before foot in a cat tread of caution. Bane felt the faster race of his heart. He sensed the sudden tension of the rifleman who lay near him. He moved the change lever of the bren from safe to automatic. He squeezed with his right hand, tightening his hold

on the pistol grip, taking up the trigger's first pressure so that the gun would fire when he closed his forefinger.

He looked through the backsight and laid the gun accurately on the centre of the figure's chest.

The bandit carried a rifle.

Following the slow advance, Bane took in the military cut of his shirt, the puttees rolled to just below the knee, the canvas belt with ammunition pouch slung, the five-pointed red star set above the peak of his cap.

The figure stopped, well within the killing ground of the ambush. Two others came in sight behind him. Bane thought, I'll spring this when the leader moves again, when he is five yards from the bren. His left hand clenched on the small of the butt, holding the gun rigid on its tree-fork support, the butt plate tight in the cushion of his shoulder.

As the leader began to move forward again, Bane minutely adjusted the lie of the gun, pivoting on the tree-fork so that the tip of the foresight centred the backsight circle, aiming one foot below the point of the bandit's chin.

Ten yards. The two figures at the rear were closer now. The first carried a pistol. The uniform and hat were khaki; slight build, probably young. The last was a man in nondescript black, unarmed. All three carried packs.

They looked neat and clean and Bane felt the seep of ooze under his feet and the sweat layering his skin. Just before his finger closed on the trigger his mind registered a fleeting envy that they should be so trim and kempt.

The leader was five yards away when Bane began to fire. As the gun opened up, so the carbines and rifles to his left fired and the silence was exploded by the ram and smash of the bren and the hammering of machine carbines, and the lash of their fire beat at the walls of the forest so that the path danced and shuddered in a wind of enraged metal, and the three on the track were down, unheard if they cried out, helpless, flailed flat by the pulverizing bursts of the bren, savaged by the raking fire of the automatics that sought them where they lay.

Bane stopped firing. He flicked the change lever to safe and got up on one knee. He cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled, "Stop!"

He watched the assault detail of two riflemen come crouching out of their cover onto the killing ground. The figures on the track were still.

He lit a cigarette, quelling the desire to talk. He sat with his back against a tree while the soldiers searched the bodies, heaping packs, weapons, and papers before him. He did not go to look

at the bodies. He was examining the last of the packs when the section commander passed through the screen of leaves, saluted, and crouched at his side.

"Well done," said Bane.

The Corporal grinned. "A good ambush," he said, "all dead."

"This place is shot out," said Bane, "tonight we go back." He indicated the packs. "Is this all?"

Down the length of the track he could see them cutting saplings. The feet and wrists of the dead would be lashed with a twist of creeper and a carrying-pole threaded through the loops. The bodies would rock and sway on the march, like animals killed for food.

The Corporal said, "One was a woman, I took this from round her neck."

Bane looked away from the path, his mind still on the march back. He looked down at the soldier's hand. A necklace lay on the palm; a thin gold chain, broken, with a gold key.

"They never give up their trinkets," the Corporal said.

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SOLUTIONS to VIEW HALLOO!

on page 93

1. *The mink, the musk-rat, the coypu, the rabbit.*
2. *Red deer. You are seeing deer aged one, two, three, four, and five years—and a hummel is one without horns.*
3. *It begins in November, ends in April. Cub-hunting starts after harvest.*
4. *i, Felix Salten's (and Disney's) deer; ii, fox; iii, Williamson's otter; iv, Grey Owl's beaver; v, Kipling's white seal.*
5. *Hare; badger; wolf.*
6. *In the eleventh century from Spain.*
7. *Red deer is the largest, roe the smallest.*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD

on page 144

Across. 1, *Pipe-light.* 6, *Feint.* 9, *Portent.* 10, *Tracker.* 11, *Tide.* 12, *Athos.* 13, *Time.* 16, *Mother wit.* 18, *Vogue.* 19, *Rivet.* 21, *Interests.* 23, *Hero.* 24, *Chuck.* 26, *Firm.* 30, *Animate.* 31, *Clamped.* 32, *Troll.* 33, *Maelstrom.*

Down. 1, *Pipit.* 2, *Peridot.* 3, *Lien.* 4, *Get at.* 5, *Tit for tat.* 6, *Foam.* 7, *Inkling.* 8, *Terseness.* 14, *Death.* 15, *Ivory.* 16, *March past.* 17, *Weigh-beam.* 20, *Vertigo.* 22, *Slipper.* 25, *Cycle.* 27, *Madam.* 28, *Fall.* 29, *Dais.*

THE DARLING BUDS OF MAY

AFTER distributing the eight ice-creams—they were the largest vanilla, chocolate, and raspberry super-bumpers, each in yellow, brown, and almost purple stripes—Pop Larkin climbed up into the cab of the gentian-blue, home-painted thirty-hundred-weight truck, laughing happily.

"Perfick wevver! You kids all right at the back there? Ma, hitch up a bit!"

Ma, in her salmon jumper, was almost two yards wide.

"I said you kids all right there?"

"How do you think they can hear," Ma said, "with you revving up all the time?"

Pop laughed again and let the engine idle. The strong May sunlight, the first hot sun of the year, made the bonnet of the truck gleam like brilliant blue enamel. All down the road, winding through the valley, miles of pink apple orchards were in late bloom, showering petals like light confetti.

"Zinnia and Petunia, Primrose, Victoria, Montgomery, Mariette!" Pop unrolled the handsome ribbon of six names but heard only five separate answers, each voice choked and clotted with ice-cream.

"Where's Mariette? Ain't Mariette there?"

"I'm here, Pop."

"That's all right, then. Thought you'd fell overboard."

"No, I'm here, Pop, I'm here."

"Perfick!" Pop said. "You think I ought to get more ice-creams? It's so hot Ma's is nearly melted."

Ma shook all over, laughing like a jelly. Little rivers of yellow, brown, and pinkish-purple cream were running down over her huge lardy hands. In her handsome big black eyes the cloudless blue May sky was reflected, making them dance as she threw out the

BY H. E. BATES

ARGOSY presents his gay, new novel

splendid bank of her bosom, quivering under its salmon jumper.

At thirty-five she still had a head of hair like black silk, curly and thick as it fell to her fat olive shoulders. Her stomach and thighs bulged like a hop-sack under the tight brown skirt, and in her remarkably small delicate cream ears her round pearl drop earrings trembled like young white cherries.

"Hitch up a bit I said, Ma. Give Father a bit o' room." Pop Larkin, who was thin, sharp, quick-eyed, jocular, and already going shining bald on top, with narrow brown side-linings to make up for it, nudged against the mass of flesh like a piglet against a sow. "Can't get the clutch in."

Ma hitched up a centimetre or two, still laughing.

"Perfick!" Pop said. "No, it ain't though. Where'd I put that money?" Ice-cream in his right hand, he began to feel in the pockets of his leather jacket with the other.

"I had it when I bought the ice-creams. Don't say I dropped it. Here, Ma, hold my ice-cream."

Ma held the ice-cream, taking a neat lick at a melting edge of it with a red sparkling tongue.

"All right, all right. Panic over. Put it in with the crisps."

Packets of potato crisps crackled out of his pocket together with a bundle of pound notes, rolled up, perhaps a hundred of them, and clasped with a thick elastic band.

"Anybody want some crisps? Don't all speak at once."

"Please!"

Pop leaned out of the driving cab and with two deft backhand movements threw packets of potato crisps into the back of the truck.

"Crisps, Ma?"

"Please," Ma said. "Lovely. Just what I wanted."

Pop took from his pocket a third packet of potato crisps and

handed it over to Ma, taking his ice-cream back and licking the dripping underside of it at the same time.

"All right. All set now." He let in the clutch at last, holding his ice-cream against the wheel. "Perfick! Ma, take a look at that sky."

Soon, in perfect sunlight, between orchards that lifted gentle pink branches in the lightest breath of wind, the truck was passing strawberry fields.

"Got the straw on," Pop said. "Won't be above anuvver few days now."

In June it would be strawberries for picking, followed by cherries before the month was ended, and then more cherries through all the month of July. Sometimes, in good summers, apples began before August did, and with them early plums and pears. In August and again in September it was apples. In September also it was hops and in October potatoes.

At strawberries alone, with a big family, you could earn fifteen pounds a day.

"See that, kids?" Pop slowed down the truck, idling past the long rows of fresh yellow straw. "Anybody don't want to go strawberry-picking?" In the answering burst of voices Pop thought, for the second time, that he couldn't hear the voice of Mariette.

"What's up with Mariette, Ma?"

"Mariette. Why?"

"Ain't heard her laughing much today."

"I expect she's thinking," Ma said.

Lost in silent astonishment at this possibility, Pop licked the last melting pink and chocolate-yellow cream from its paper, and let the paper fly out of the window.

"Thinking. What's she got to think about?"

"She's going to have a baby."

"Oh?" Pop said. "Well, that don't matter. Perfick. Jolly good." Ma did not seem unduly worried either.

"Who is it?" Pop said.

"She can't make up her mind."

Ma sat happily munching crisps, staring at cherry orchards as they sailed past the truck, every bough hung with swelling fruit, palest pink on the sunnier edges of the trees.

"Have to make up her mind some time, won't she?" Pop said.

"Why?"

"Oh! I just thought," Pop said.

Ma, who had almost finished the crisps, poured the last remaining golden crumbs into the palm of her left hand. Over the years, as she had grown fatter, the three big turquoise and pearl rings she wore had grown tighter and tighter on her fingers, so that every now and then she had to have them cut off, enlarged, and put back again.

"Ah well, we'll think of something," Pop said. "Like some more crisps? How about some chocolate? Let's stop and have a beer. Got a crate in the back."

"Not now," Ma said. "Wait till we get home. We'll have a Guinness then and I'll warm the fish and chips up."

Pop drove happily, both hands free now, staring with pleasure at the cherries, the apples, and the strawberry fields, all so lovely under the May sunlight, and thinking with pleasure too of his six children and the splendid, handsome names he and Ma had given them. Jolly good names, perfick, every one of them, he thought. There was a reason for them all.

Montgomery, the only boy, had been named after the General. Primrose had come in the spring. Zinnia and Petunia were twins and they were the flowers Ma liked most. Victoria, the youngest girl, had been born in plum-time.

Suddenly he couldn't remember why they had called the eldest Mariette. "Ma," he said, "trying to think why we called her Mariette. Why did we?"

"I wanted to call her after that queen," Ma said. "I always felt so sorry for that queen."

"What queen?"

"The French one. Marie Antoinette. But you said it was too long. You'd never say it, you said."

"Oh! I remember," Pop said. "I remember now. We put the two together."

Ten minutes later they were home. With pride and satisfaction Pop gazed on home as it suddenly appeared beyond its scrubby fringe of woodland, half filled with bluebells, half with scratching red-brown hens.

"Home looks nice," he said. "Allus does though, don't it? Perfick."

"Lovely," Ma said.

"We're all right," Pop said. "Got nothing to worry about, Ma, have we?"

"Not that I can think of," Ma said.

Pop drew the truck to a standstill in a dusty yard of nettles, old oil drums, corrugated pig-sties, and piles of rusty iron in which a line of white ducks, three grey goats, and a second batch of red-brown hens set up a concerted, trembling fuss of heads and wings, as if delighted.

"Just in time for dinner," Pop said. It was almost four o'clock. "Anybody not hungry?"

He leapt down from the cab. Like him, everybody was laughing. He knew they were all hungry; they always were.

"Down you come, you kids. Down." Letting down the back-board and holding up both arms, he took the youngest children one by one, jumping them down to the yard, laughing and kissing them as they came.

Presently only Mariette remained on the truck, wearing jodhpurs and a pale lemon shirt, standing erect, black-haired, soft-eyed, olive-skinned, and so well-made in a slender and delicate way that he could not believe that Ma, at seventeen too, had once looked exactly like her.

"It's all right. I can get down myself, Pop."

Pop held up his arms, looking at her tenderly.

"Ah! come on. Ma's told me."

"Let me get down myself, Pop."

He stood watching her. Her eyes roamed past him, flashing and dark as her mother's, searching the yard.

It suddenly crossed his mind that she was afraid of something, not happy, and he half opened his mouth to comment on this unlikely, disturbing, unheard-of fact when she suddenly shook her black head and startled him by saying, "Pop, there's a man in the yard. There's a man over there by the horse-box. Watching us."

Pop walked across the yard towards the horse-box. He owned two horses, one a young black mare for Mariette, the other a piebald pony for the kids. Mariette, who was crazy about horses, rode to point-to-points, sometimes went hunting, and even jumped at shows. She was wonderful about horses. She looked amazing on a horse. Perfick, he thought.

"Hullo, hullo, hullo," he said. "Good morning. Afternoon rather. Looking for me?"

The man, young, spectacled, pale-faced, trilby-hatted, with a small brown toothbrush moustache, carried a black briefcase under his arm.

"Mr. Sidney Larkin?"

"Larkin, that's me," Pop said. He laughed in ringing fashion. "Larkin by name. Larkin by nature. What can I do for you? Nice wevver."

"I'm from the office of the Inspector of Taxes."

Pop stood blank and innocent, staggered by the very existence of such a person.

"Inspector of *what*?"

"Taxes. Inland Revenue."

"You must have come to the wrong house," Pop said.

"You are Mr. Sidney Larkin?" The young man snapped open the briefcase, took out a paper, and glanced at it quickly, nervously touching his spectacles with the back of his hand. "Sidney Charles Larkin."

"That's me. That's me all right," Pop said.

"According to our records," the young man said, "you have made no return of income for the past year."

"Return?" Pop said. "What return? Why? Nobody asked me."

"You should have had a form," the young man said. He took a yellow-buff sheet of paper from the briefcase and held it up. "One like this."

"Form?" Pop said. "Form?"

Ma was crossing the yard with a box of groceries under one arm and a bag of fruit in the other. Three big ripe pineapples stuck cactus-like heads from the top of the huge paper bag. The twins loved pineapple.

"Ma, did we have a form like this?" Pop called. "Never had no form, did we?"

"Never seen one. Sure we never."

"Come over here, Ma, a minute. This gentleman's from the Inspector of summat or other."

"I got dinner to get," Ma said, and strode blandly on with groceries and pineapples, huge as a buffalo. "You want your dinner, don't you?"

Pop turned with an air of balmy indifference to the young man, who was staring incredulously at the receding figure of Ma as if she were part of the menagerie of hens, goats, ducks, and horses.

"No, never had no form. Ma says so."

"You should have done. Two, at least, were sent. If not three."

"Well, Ma says so. Ma ought to know. Ma's the one who does the paper work."

The young man opened his mouth to speak and for a moment it was as if a strangled, startled gurgle came out. His voice choked itself back, however, and in reality the sound came from a drove of fifteen young turkeys winding down from the strip of woodland.

"Won't hurt you," Pop said. "How about a nice hen-bird for Christmas? Put your name on it now."

"This form has to be returned to the Inspector," the young man said. "There is a statutory obligation—"

"Can't return it if I ain't got it," Pop said. "Now can I?"

"Here's another."

As he recoiled from the buff-yellow sheet of paper, Pop saw Mariette walking across the yard, slender, long-striding, on her way to the wooden, brush-roofed stable where both pony and horse were kept.

"I got no time for forms," Pop said. "I got pigs to feed. Turkeys to feed. Hens to feed. Kids to feed. I ain't had no dinner. Nobody ain't had no dinner." Suddenly the young man was not listening. With amazement he was following the progress of Mariette's dark, yellow-shirted figure across the yard.

"My eldest daughter," Pop said. "Crazy on horses. Mad on riding. You do any riding, Mister—Mister—I never caught your name."

"Charlton."

"Like to meet her, Mister Charlton?" Pop said. The young man was still staring, mouth partly open. Between his fingers the tax form fluttered in the breezy sunlit air.

"Mariette, come over here a jiff. Young man here's crazy on horses, like you. Wants to meet you. Comes from the Ministry of Revenue or summat." In astonished silence the young man stared at the new celestial body, the yellow shirt, as it floated across the background of rusty iron, pig-sties, abandoned oil drums, goat-chewn hawthorn bushes, and dusty earth.

"Mister Charlton, this is my eldest, Mariette. The one who's mad on horses. Rides everywhere. You've very like seen her picture in the papers."

"Hullo," Mariette said. "I spotted you first."

"That's right, she saw you," Pop said. "Who's that nice young feller in the yard, she said."

"So you," Mariette said, "like riding, too?"

The eyes of the young man groped at the sunlight as if still unable correctly to focus the celestial body smiling at him from three feet away.

"I say every kid should have a horse," Pop said. "Nothing like a horse. I'm going to get every one of my kids a horse."

Suddenly the young man woke from mesmerism, making a startling statement.

"I saw you riding over at Barfield," he said. "In the third race. At Easter. You came second."

"I hope you won a bob or two on her," Pop said.

Again he laughed in ringing fashion, bringing from beyond the stable an echo of goose voices as three swaggering grey-white birds emerged from a barricade of nettles, to be followed presently by the half-sleepy, dainty figures of a dozen guinea-fowl.

"Pity we didn't know you was coming," Pop said. "We're killing a goose tomorrow. Always kill a goose or a turkey or a few chickens at the weekend. Or else guinea-fowl. Like guinea-fowl?"

If the young man had any kind of answer ready it was snatched from him by the voice of Ma, calling suddenly from the house, "Dinner's nearly ready. Anybody coming in or am I slaving for nothing?"

"We're coming, Ma."

Pop turned with eager, tempting relish to the young man, still speechless, still struggling with his efforts to focus correctly the dark-haired girl.

"Well, we got to go, Mister Charlton. Sorry. Ma won't have no waiting."

"Now, Mr. Larkin, about this form—"

"Did you see me at Newchurch?" Mariette said. "I rode there, too."

"As a matter of fact, I did—I did, yes. But, Mr. Larkin, about this form—"

"What form?" Mariette said.

"Oh! some form, some form," Pop said. "I tell you what, Mister Charlton, you come in and have a bite o' dinner with us. No, no trouble. Tons o' grub—"

"I've eaten, thank you."

"Well, cuppa tea then. Cuppa coffee. Bottle o' beer. Bottle o' Guinness. Drop o' cider."

The entire body of the young man seemed to swirl helplessly, as if half intoxicated, out of balance, on its axis. "Oh yes, do," Mariette said and, by the time he had recovered, he found himself being led by Pop Larkin towards the house, from which Ma was already calling a second time.

"If nobody don't come in three minutes I'll give it to the cats."

"Know anybody who wants a pure white kitten?" Pop said. "Don't want a pure white kitten, do you?"

"So you were at Newchurch, too," Mariette said. "I wish I'd known."

A moment later Pop threw up his hands in a gesture of near ecstasy at the overpowering beauty, which suddenly seemed to strike him all afresh, of the May afternoon. "Beautiful, ain't it?" he said. "Perfick. I got a beautiful place here. Don't you think I got a beautiful place here, Mister Charlton?"

In the kitchen a radio was loudly playing jazz. In the living-room next door, where the curtains were half drawn, a television set was on, giving to the nine faces crowded about the table a grey-purple, flickering glow.

"Have just what you fancy, Mister Charlton," Pop said. "If you don't see it here, ask for it. Bottle o' beer? Glass o' sherry? Pass the vinegar, Ma."

Soon the young man, arms crooked at the crowded table, was nursing a cup of tea. In the centre of the table stood the three pineapples, flanked on all sides by plates of fish and chips, more coloured blocks of ice-cream, pots of raspberry and strawberry jam, bottles of tomato ketchup and Guinness, bottles of Worcester sauce, and cups of tea, chocolate biscuits, and piles of icy buns.

"Perhaps Mister Charlton would like a couple o' sardines with his tea?" Pop said. "Montgomery, fetch the sardines."

Mr. Charlton, bemused by the name of Montgomery, protested faintly that he did not like sardines.

"Mister Charlton saw Mariette riding at Barfield," Pop said.

"And at Newchurch," Mariette said.

"Funny we didn't see you," Ma said. "We was all there."

"Mister Charlton," Pop said, "loves horses."

"Turn up the contrast," Ma said, "it's getting dark."

In the television's flickering purplish light the young man watched the faces about the table, as they munched on fish and chips, ice-cream, tomato ketchup, and jam, becoming more and more like pallid, eyeless ghouls. Pop had placed him between Ma and Mariette, and presently he detected under the great breathing bank of Ma's bosom, now mauve-salmon in the flickering light, the shape of two white kittens somehow nestling on the bulging precipice of her lap. Occasionally the kittens miaowed prettily and Ma fed them with scraps of fish and batter.

Above the noise of jazz, television voices, kittens, geese hawking at the kitchen door, and the chattering voices of the family he found it hard to make himself heard.

"Mr. Larkin, about this form. If you've got any difficulties I could help you fill it in."

"All right," Pop said, "you fill it in."

"It's still too dark," Ma said. "Turn it up a bit. It never stays where you put it nowadays."

"I'll give the damn thing one more week to behave itself," Pop said. "And if it don't then I'll turn it in for another."

Mr. Charlton spread the yellow-buff form on the table in front of him and then took out his fountain pen and unscrewed the cap.

"Ma, is there any more ice-cream?" Primrose said.

"In the fridge," Ma said. "Big block o' strawberry mousse. Get that."

"Full name: Sidney Charles Larkin," Mr. Charlton said and wrote it down. "Occupation: Dealer?"

"Don't you call him dealer," Ma said. "I'll give you dealer. He owns land."

"Well, landowner—"

"Farmer," Pop said.

"Well, farmer," Mr. Charlton said. "I'm very sorry. Farmer."

"Mariette, cut the pineapple," Ma said. "Montgomery, go into the kitchen and fetch that pint jug of cream."

While Mr. Charlton filled in the form Mariette stood up, reached for the bread knife and started to cut the pineapples, putting thick juicy slices on plates over which Ma poured heavy yellow cream.

"Real Jersey," Ma said. "From our cow."

Every time Mariette reached over for another plate she brushed the sleeve of Mr. Charlton, who either made sketchy blobs on the tax form or could not write at all.

"How many children?" Mr. Charlton said. "Six? Is that right? No more?"

"Well, not yet, old man. Plenty o' time though. Give us a chance," Pop said, and again laughed in ringing fashion.

"Gone again," Ma said. "You can't see a blessed thing. Montgomery, Primrose! Switch it off and change it for the set in our bedroom."

In the half darkness that now smothered the room, Mr. Charlton felt something smooth, sinuous, and slender brush against his right calf. For one shimmering, unnerving moment he sat convinced that it was Mariette's leg entwining itself about his own. As it curled towards his thigh he felt his throat begin choking, but suddenly he looked down to realize that already the geese were under the table, where Ma was feeding them with scraps of fish, half-cold chips, and crumbled icy buns.

Unnerved, he found it difficult to frame his next important question. "Of course this is confidential in every way," he said, "but at what would you estimate your income?"

"Estimate, estimate?" Pop said. "Income? What income?"

Montgomery and Primrose, who had carried one television set away, now brought in another, larger than the first.

"Steady there, steady!" Ma said. "Watch where you're looking. Mind the cocktail cabinet."

"Hear that, Ma?" Pop said. "Income!"

Ma, as she had done in the truck, started laughing like a jelly. "Outcome more likely," she said. "Outcome I should say."

"Six kids to feed and clothe," Pop said. "This place to run. Fodder to buy. Wheat as dear as gold dust. Pig-food enough to frighten you to death. Living all the time going up and up. Vet's

fees. Fowl pest. Foot-and-mouth. Swine fever. Birds all the time dying. Income, old man? *Income?* I should like some, old man."

Before Mr. Charlton could answer this, the second television set threw across the room its pallid, unreal glow, now in a curious nightmare green. At the same moment the twins, Zinnia and Petunia, demanded more pineapple. The geese made shovelling noises under the table and Mariette, rising to cut fresh slices, suddenly turned to Mr. Charlton with modest, almost whispered apology.

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Charlton. I didn't offer you any pineapple. Would you like some?"

"No thanks. I'm not allowed it. I find it too acid."

"What a shame. Won't you change your mind? They're nice ripe ones."

"Ought to be," Ma said. "Cost enough."

"I'm afraid I'm simply not allowed it," Mr. Charlton said. "I have to go very carefully. I have to manage mostly on eggs and that sort of thing."

"Eggs," Pop said. "Eggs—why didn't you say so? Got plenty of eggs, Ma, haven't we? Give Mister Charlton a boiled egg or two wiv his tea."

"How would you like that?" Ma said. "A couple o' boiled eggs, Mister Charlton? What do you say?"

To the delight of Ma, Mr. Charlton confessed that that was what he really wanted.

"I'll do them," Mariette said. "Three minutes? Four? How long?"

"Very light," Mr. Charlton said. "Three."

"Nice big uns—brown!" Pop called to Mariette as she went into the kitchen, where the geese presently followed her, brushing past Mr. Charlton's legs again as they passed, once more to give him that shimmering, shocking moment of unnerving ecstasy.

"About this income," Mr. Charlton said. "Can you give me an estimate? Just an estimate."

"Estimate it'll be an' all, old man," Pop said. "Lucky if we clear a fiver a week, ain't we, Ma?"

"Fiver? I'd like to see one," Ma said.

"We want boiled eggs, too!" the twins said, as in one voice. "Can we have boiled eggs?"

"Give over. Can't you see I'm cutting the pineapple?" Ma said. Everybody except Mr. Charlton had large second helpings of pineapple, with more cream. When Ma had finished ladling out the cream she poured the remainder of it into a tablespoon and then licked the spoon with her big red tongue. After two or three spoonfuls she cleaned the spoon with her finger and fed one of the white kittens with cream.

On the television screen a posse of cowboys fired thirty revolvers into a mountainside and Mr. Charlton said, "I'm afraid we have to know what your income is, Mr. Larkin. Supposing—"

"All right," Pop said, "that's a fair question, old man. Fair for me, fair for another. How much do you get?"

"Oh well, me? Not all that much. Civil servant, you know."

"Nice safe job, though."

"Nice safe job, yes. I suppose so."

"Nothing like a nice safe job," Pop said. "As long as you're happy. Do you reckon you're happy?"

Mr. Charlton, who did not look at all happy, said quickly, "Supposing I put down a provisional five hundred?"

"Hundred weeks in a year now, Ma," Pop said, laughing again. "Well, put it down, old man, put it down. No harm in putting it down."

"Now, names of children," Mr. Charlton said.

While Pop was reciting, with customary pride, the full names of the children, beginning with the youngest, Victoria, Mariette came back with two large brown boiled eggs in violet plastic egg-cups to hear Pop say, "Nightingales in them woods up there behind the house, Mr. Charlton. Singing all day."

"Do nightingales sing all day?" Mr. Charlton said. "I wasn't aware—"

"All day, all night," Pop said. "Like everything else in the mating season they go hell for leather."

The plate holding the two eggs was embroidered with slices of the thinnest white bread and butter. Mariette had cut them herself. And now Mr. Charlton looked at them, as he looked at the eggs, with reluctance and trepidation, as if not wanting to tamper with their fresh, neat virginity.

"I've been looking at you," Ma said. "I don't think you get enough to eat by half."

"I live in lodgings," Mr. Charlton said. "It's not always—"

"We want to have some of your egg," the twins said. "Give us some of your egg!"

"Now you've started summat," Pop said.

A moment later Mr. Charlton announced the startling discovery that the twins were just alike; he simply couldn't tell one from the other.

"You're quick," Pop said. "You're quick."

"It's gone dark again," Ma said. "Turn up the contrast. And Montgomery, fetch me my Guinness. There's a good boy."

Soon, while Ma drank Guinness and Pop spoke passionately again of nightingales, bluebells that clothed the copses "fick as carpets, ficker in fact," and how soon it would be the great time of the year, the time he loved most, the time of strawberry fields and cherries everywhere, Mr. Charlton found himself with a twin on each knee, dipping white fingers of bread and butter into delicious craters of warm golden egg-yolk.

"I hope the eggs are done right?" Mariette said.

"Perfect."

"Perfick they will be an' all if she does 'em, you can bet you," Pop said.

Mr. Charlton had given up, for the time being, all thought of the buff-yellow form. A goose brushed his legs again. Outside, somewhere in the yard, a dog barked, and the drove of turkeys seemed to respond in bubbling chorus. Far beyond them, in broken, throaty tones, a cuckoo called, almost in its June voice, and when it was silent the entire afternoon simmered in a single marvellous moment of quietness, breathlessly.

" If you don't mind me saying so," Ma said, " a few days in the country'd do you a world of good."

" What are we having Sunday, Ma? " Pop said. " Turkey? "

" What you like. Just what you fancy."

" Roast pork," Montgomery said. " I like roast pork. With them brown onions."

" Or goose," Pop said. " How about goose? We ain't had goose since Easter." In enthusiastic tones Pop went on to ask Mr. Charlton whether he preferred goose, turkey, or roast pork but Mr. Charlton, bewildered, trying to clean his misty spectacles and at the same time cut into thin fingers the last of his bread and butter, confessed he hardly knew.

" Well, I tell you what," Ma said, " we'll have goose *and* roast pork. Then I can do apple sauce for the two."

" Perfick," Pop said. " Perfick. Primrose, pass me the tomato ketchup. I've got a bit of iced bun to finish up."

" Dinner on Sunday then," Ma said. " About two o'clock."

Mr. Charlton, who was unable to decide from this whether he had been invited to dinner or not, felt fate softly brush his legs again in the shape of a goose-neck. At the same time he saw Mariette smile at him with intensely dark, glowing eyes, almost as if she had in fact brushed his leg with her own, and he felt his limbs again begin melting. Across the fields a cuckoo called again and Pop echoed it with a belch that seemed to surprise him not only by its length and richness but by the fact that it was a belch at all.

" Manners," he said. " Pardon," and beat his chest in stern, suppressive apology. " Wind all of a sudden."

" What's on now? " Ma said. On the television screen all shooting had died and two men on horses, one a piebald, were riding away up a valley, waving farewell hands.

" Nobody's birthday, Sunday, is it? " Pop said.

" Nobody's birthday before August," Ma said.

" Then it's mine," Mariette said. " I'll be eighteen."

" Pity it ain't nobody's birthday," Pop said. " We might have had a few fireworks."

Suddenly all the geese were gone from the kitchen and Ma, marvelling at this fact, started laughing like a jelly again, and said, " They did that once before. They heard us talking."

" Tell you what," Pop said, " if you've had enough, Mister Charlton, why don't you get Mariette to take you as far as the wood and hear them nightingales? I don't think you believe they sing all day, do you? "

" Oh! yes, I—"

"Shall we ride or walk?" Mariette said. "I don't mind the pony if you want to ride."

"I think I'd rather walk."

"In that case I'll run and change into a dress," she said. "It's getting a bit warm for jodhpurs."

While Mariette had gone upstairs the twins abandoned Mr. Charlton's eggless plate and fetched jam jars from the kitchen.

"Going to the stall," they said. "Think we'll put honeysuckle on today instead of bluebells."

As they ran off Pop said, "That's the flower-stall they keep at the corner of the road down there. Wild flowers. Tuppence a bunch for motorists. Everybody works here, y'know."

"I think I passed it," Mr. Charlton said, "as I walked up from the bus."

"That's the one," Pop said. "Everybody's got to work here so's we can scratch a living. Montgomery, you'd better get off to your goats and start milking 'em."

Presently Ma, concerned at Mr. Charlton's air of retreat, uncertainty, and fatigue, spread hands like lardy legs of pork across her salmon jumper and said with earnest kindness, "Taking your holiday soon, Mr. Charlton? Where do you usually go?"

"I hadn't—"

"You should come strawberry-picking with us," Ma said. "Do you the world of good. Else cherry-picking. Best holiday in the world if the weather's nice. Make yourself a lot o' money, too."

"Perfick," Pop said. "Don't cost nothing either. Here's Mariette. Perfick, I tell you."

Mr. Charlton rose from the table to find himself stunned by a new astral body, now in a lime-green dress with broad black belt, a flouncing skirt, loose neck, and short scalloped sleeves. Her beautiful dark eyes were smiling at him splendidly.

"Is that your shantung?" Ma said. "You'll be warm enough in that, dear, will you?"

"Oh, it's hot!" Mariette said. "It's nice to feel the breeze blowing round my legs again. You ready, Mr. Charlton?"

Mr. Charlton, the buff-yellow form forgotten, turned and followed Mariette, who actually stretched out a friendly hand.

As they crossed a yard noisy with hawking geese, mumbling turkeys, and braying goats being led to milking by Montgomery, Pop called, "Remember about Sunday, Mr. Charlton, won't you? Don't forget about Sunday."

"You really mean it?" Mr. Charlton halted, and turned back, amazed. "Are you quite sure?"

"Sure?" Pop said. "Blimey, old man, I'm going to kill the geese any minute now."

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

"One goose or two, Ma?" Pop called. "Two geese be enough, or shall we have three?"

Mr. Charlton, still stunned and amazed, turned to face the waiting figure of Mariette and saw it miraculously framed against

piles of junk, rampant nettles, and, in the near distance, deep strips of bluebells fenced away in the belt of woodland from flocks of brown, marauding hens. Her legs, in pale beige silk stockings, were surprisingly shapely and slender. Her breasts protruded with grace from the soft lime shantung.

He could not believe in this figure. Nor, five minutes later, could he believe that the yard of nettles and junk—Pop's beautiful, incredible paradise—lay only a hundred yards away, screened by thickets of hornbeam and hazel, oaks in olive flower, and may trees carrying blossom as rich and thick as Ma's lavish Jersey cream.

"You didn't really believe about the nightingales, did you?"

"No."

"Listen," she said. "You will."

Walking along the woodland path, Mr. Charlton could hear only a single untangled chorus of evening birdsong, unseparated into species, confusing as the tuning of orchestra strings.

"Let's stand here by the gate, and listen," Mariette said. "Let's stand and listen, here."

Mr. Charlton, transfixed, utterly bemused, stood by the gate and listened. Patches of evening sunlight, broken gold, sprinkled down through oak branches, like delicate quivering translations in light of the birdnotes themselves.

"No, not that one," Mariette said. "That's a blackbird. Not the one over there, either. That's a wren. Now—that one. The one in the chestnut up there. The one with the long notes, and then the long pause. Can you hear it now? That's a nightingale."

Mr. Charlton listened, hardly breathing, and heard for the first time in his life, in a conscious moment, the voice of a nightingale singing against a May evening sky.

Enthralled, still hardly believing it, he turned to see the deep black eyes holding him in utter captivation, and heard her say again, "You really didn't believe it, did you?"

"I must say I didn't."

"I can tell you something else you didn't believe, either."

"What was that?"

"You didn't believe about me, did you?" she said. "You didn't believe I was the same girl you saw riding at Easter, did you?"

"No," he said. "How did you know?"

"I guessed," she said. "I could see it in your eyes. I was watching you." She lifted her hands and held them suddenly against his cheeks without either boldness or hesitation, but with a lightness of touch that woke in Mr. Charlton's legs exactly the same melting, unnerving sensation as when the geese had brushed against him under the table.

A moment later he saw her lips upraised. "Who did you think I was?"

Mr. Charlton made a startling, embarrassed confession.

"I thought—well, I was actually told you were someone else—in point of fact, that you were a niece of Lady Planson-Forbes. You know, at Carrington Hall—"

Mariette began laughing in ringing tones, very much like her father. "Now you've just found I wasn't."

"Well, yes—"

"You feel it makes any difference?"

"Well, in point of fact—"

"I'm just the same, aren't I?" She smiled, and he found his eyes level with her bare, olive shoulder. "I'm just me. The same girl. Just me. Just the same."

Again she touched his face with her hands, and Mr. Charlton took hurried refuge in a sudden recollection of the buff-yellow form. "By the way, I mustn't forget to get your father to sign that form before I go."

"You'll have to sign it for him," she said, "or Ma will. He can't write his name."

She laughed again and Mr. Charlton, his limbs melting once more as she lifted his hand to her bare warm shoulder, heard consciously but dizzily, for the second time in his life, a passionate burst of song from the nightingales.

At the same moment, back in the house, Pop returned to the kitchen after wringing the necks of three fat geese and poured himself a much-needed glass of beer.

"A few days like this, Ma," he said, "'ll put a bit o' paint on the strawberries."

Ma was raking the kitchen fire, putting on it empty ice-cream cartons, scraps of fish and chips, eggshells, pineapple tops, and Mr. Charlton's buff-yellow paper.

"I don't know as I shan't get a few bottles o' port wine in for Sunday," Pop said, "so we can celebrate."

"Celebrate what?"

"Well," Pop said, "what about Mariette?"

Ma laughed again, jumper shaking like a salmon jelly.

"The only thing is," Pop said, "I hope he won't want to take her away from here." He carried his beer to the kitchen door and from there contemplated, almost with reverence, the paradisaical scene beyond. "Ma, you know we got a beautiful place here. Paradise. I don't know what we'd do if she were took away from here."

Standing in the evening sunlight, gazing across the pile of junk, the nettles, the rusting hovels, and the scratching, dusty hens, Pop sighed loudly and with such content that the sound seemed to travel with perfect definition across the surrounding fields of buttercups and may, gathering its echo at last from the mingled sounds of the remaining geese, the voices of cuckoos calling as they flew across the meadows, and the small, passionate, invisible nightingales.

"Perfick," Pop said. "You couldn't wish for nothing more perfick nowhere."

When Mariette and Mr. Charlton came down from the bluebell wood an hour later, Mariette carrying a bunch of bluebells and pink campion, Mr. Charlton bearing in his palm, with the tenderest

care, two blue thrushes' eggs a bird had dropped in the grass at the woodside, Pop was washing pig-buckets under a tap in the yard.

" Pigs look well," Pop said. " I think we'll kill one. Hear the nightingales? " Mr. Charlton had not a second in which to answer this question before Pop said, " Wondering where you two had got to, Mister Charlton. Tea's ready. Just in time."

A searching odour of frying kippers cut almost savagely through the warm May air.

" I thought we just had tea," Mr. Charlton said.

" That was dinner."

" I ought to catch my bus," Mr. Charlton said. " I must. The last one goes at eight o'clock."

" Ma won't hear of that," Pop said. " Will she, Mariette? Daresay Mariette won't either. Like to wash your hands? What you got there? "

Mr. Charlton revealed the thrushes' eggs, brilliant blue in his office-pale hands, and Mariette gave him a small dark smile of fascination that held him once more transfixed and speechless.

" Always run you home in the truck," Pop said. " Next time you come out you must bring your car. What kind of car you got, Mister Charlton? "

Mr. Charlton confessed that he had no car.

Pop was stunned. " No car, no car? " he said. " That'll never do. Can't have that. Hear that, Mariette? Mister Charlton ain't got no car."

" I don't think I'll have the time to come out again," Mr. Charlton said. " Do you think we could go into the question of the tax form before I go? It's very important."

" Tea first," Pop said. " Must have a cuppa tea first. Don't want to make Ma mad, do you? "

Pop finished drying his hands and gave Mr. Charlton the towel. Mr. Charlton put the two thrushes' eggs into his pocket and ran tap water over his hands, washing them with a gritty cake of purple soap. Mariette gave him another intimate, flashing smile and then went towards the house, calling that she was going to powder her nose, and Mr. Charlton, completely captivated by the delicate vision of green shantung retreating in the golden evening sunshine, forgot the thrushes' eggs and said, " I don't know if you appreciate how severe the penalties are for not making a tax return, Mr. Larkin."

" Ma's calling," Pop said.

Mr. Charlton listened but couldn't hear a sound.

" I shall have to make some sort of report to my office," Mr. Charlton said. " Then if you don't co-operate it'll be taken out of my hands and after that—"

" Beautiful evening, ain't it? " Pop said. Once again, caught in his own web of enchantment, he turned to stare at an evening distilled now into even deeper gold by the lower angle of light falling across still seas of buttercups and long-curled milky waves of may.

"I strongly recommend you—"

"Pair o' goldfinches," Pop said, but Mr. Charlton was too slow to see the birds, which darted past him like dipping sparks of scarlet, black, and gold.

In the kitchen Ma was frying a third batch of four fat tawny kippers in a brand-new aluminium pan while Mariette powdered her face over the sink, looking into a heart-shaped mirror stuck about with little silver, pink, and violet seashells.

"How'd you get on with Mr. Charlton, duckie?"

"Slow," Mariette said. "He's very shy."

"Well, he mustn't be shy," Ma said. "That won't get you nowhere."

"He would talk about horses."

"You'll have to find something a bit better than that to talk about, won't you?" Ma said. "Bit more stimulating."

Mariette, who was busy making up her lips with a tender shade of pink, not at all unlike the pink of the rose campion, that went well with her dress of cool lime shantung, did not answer.

"I think he looks half starved," Ma said. "No blood in him. Wants feeding up. I'll find him a good fat kipper."

Mariette was wetting small wisps of short hair with her fingertips and winding them about her ears like black watch-springs.

"Put some of my perfume on," Ma said. "The gardenia. Or else that French one. They both stand by my jewel box in our bedroom."

While Mariette went upstairs to dab perfume behind her ears and in soft hollows of her bare legs, Mr. Charlton and Pop came in from the yard to join Montgomery, Primrose, Victoria, and the twins, who sat licking thick bars of choc-ice and watching a television programme in which a panel of three men, a clergyman, and a woman was discussing prostitution and what should be done about it.

"Strawberry-picking on Monday over at Benacre, Pop," Montgomery said. "I heard from Fred Brown."

"That's early," Pop said. "Earliest we've ever been. I said this wevver'd soon put the paint on 'em."

Ma came in bearing a big dish of stinging hot kippers running with fat dabs of butter, and on the television screen the woman shook a condemnatory finger at the gaping children and said, "The women are, on the whole, less to be blamed than pitied. It is largely the fault of man."

"Ma," Pop said, "strawberry-picking Monday. Better get that deep-freeze, hadn't we?"

"Sooner the better," Ma said. "Better go in first thing tomorrow. It's Saturday."

She began to serve kippers. "Start pouring tea, Primrose. Kipper, Mister Charlton? Here we come. Nice fat one. Help yourself to more butter if you want to."

While Ma served kippers and Primrose poured tea, Pop rose from the table and fetched a bottle of whisky from the cocktail cabinet.

"Milk?" he said to Ma.

"Please," Ma said. "Just what I need."

Pop poured whisky into Ma's tea, then into his own, and then turned to Mr. Charlton, the bottle upraised.

"Drop o' milk, Mister Charlton?"

"No, no, no. No, really. Not for me. No, really not for me."

"Relieves the wind, frees the kidneys, and opens the bowels," Pop said blandly.

"No, no. No, really. Not at this time of day."

"Do you all the good in the world, Mister Charlton."

Pop, after filling up Mr. Charlton's teacup with whisky, stood for a moment staring at the television screen and said, "What the ruddy 'ell are they talking about? Kids, how much money you make on the stall?"

"Eighteen pence. There was a policeman on a motor bike come along."

"Pity he hadn't got summat else to do," Pop said.

With elbows on the table Victoria, who was trying to eat kipper with a spoon, said in a shrill quick voice, "I don't like kippers. They're made of combs."

"Now, now," Pop said. "Now, now. Manners, manners. Elbows!"

"Pop has 'em at a word," Ma said.

Mr. Charlton sat held in a new constriction of bewilderment made more complex by the arrival of Mariette, fresh and lovely with new pink lipstick, face powder, and a heavy fragrance of gardenias that overwhelmed him in a cloud of intoxication as she came and sat at his side.

As if this were not enough she had brought with her the bluebells and the rose campion arranged in an orange and crimson jar. She set the jar in the centre of the table, where the flowers glowed in the nightmare, marine glow of the television light like a strange sheaf of seaweed. The bluebells too smelt exquisitely.

"Sorry I'm late," she whispered to Mr. Charlton and he could have sworn, in another moment of shimmering agony, that her silky legs had brushed his own. "Just had to make myself presentable."

"By the way, Mister Charlton," Pop said, "what's your other name? Don't like this mistering."

"Cedric." Ma started choking.

"Kipper bone!" Pop said. "Happened once before."

He rose from the table and struck Ma a severe blow in the middle of the back. She boomed like a drum.

"Better?" Pop said, and hit her a second time rather more robustly than the first.

Except for bouncing slightly Ma did not seem to mind at all.

"Worst of kippers," Pop said. "Too much wirework. Fetched it up?"

On the television screen a man in close-up stared with steadfast earnestness at Mr. Charlton and the eight Larkins and said, "Well,

there it is. We leave it with you. What do you think? What is to be done about these women? Is it their fault? Is it the fault of men? If not, whose fault is it?" And once again, for the third time, Ma started laughing like a jelly.

"Play crib at all, Mister Charlton?" Pop said.

Mr. Charlton had to confess he had never heard of crib.

"Card game," Pop said. "We all play here. Learns you figures. Mariette plays. Mariette could show you how."

Mr. Charlton turned to look shyly at Mariette and found his vision, already blurred by the curious light from the television screen, clouded into more numbing and exquisite confusion by the thick sweet fragrance of gardenia. In return she gazed at him with dark silent eyes, so that he could not help trembling and was even glad when Pop said, "Like billiards, or snooker? Got a nice table out the back there. Full-size. We could have a game o' snooker after tea."

"You know," Mr. Charlton said, "I'm really awfully sorry, but I must catch this eight o'clock bus."

"No eight o'clock bus now," Montgomery said. "They knocked it off soon after that petrol rationing started."

"That's right," Ma said. "They never put it back again."

Mr. Charlton half rose from the table, agitated.

"In that case I must start walking. It's eight miles."

"Walking, my foot," Pop said. "I said I'll run you home in the truck. Or else Mariette can take you in the station-wagon. Mariette can drive. Mariette'll take you, won't you, Mariette?"

"Of course." Mr. Charlton sat down, mesmerized.

"Why don't you stay the night?" Pop said. "That's all right, ain't it, Ma?"

"More the merrier."

"Perfick," Pop said. "Ma'll make you a bed up on the billiard table."

"No, really—"

"It's so simple," Mariette said. "After all tomorrow's Saturday. You don't have to go to the office Saturday, do you?"

"Course he don't," Pop said. "Offices don't work Saturdays. They don't none of 'em know what work is no more."

"That's settled then," Ma said. "I'll put him on that new superfoam mattress Mariette has for sunbathing."

"Oh, that mattress is marvellous!" Mariette said. "You sink in. Your body simply dreams into that mattress."

In another unnerving moment Mr. Charlton saw the girl, hands raised to her bare shoulders, luxuriously enact for him the attitudes of dreaming into the mattress. As her eyes closed and her lips parted gently, he struggled to bring himself back to reality, firmness, and a state of resistance, and he said, "No, I'm sorry. I really must be adamant."

Pop stared with open mouth, powerfully stunned and impressed by this word. He could not ever remember having heard it even on television.

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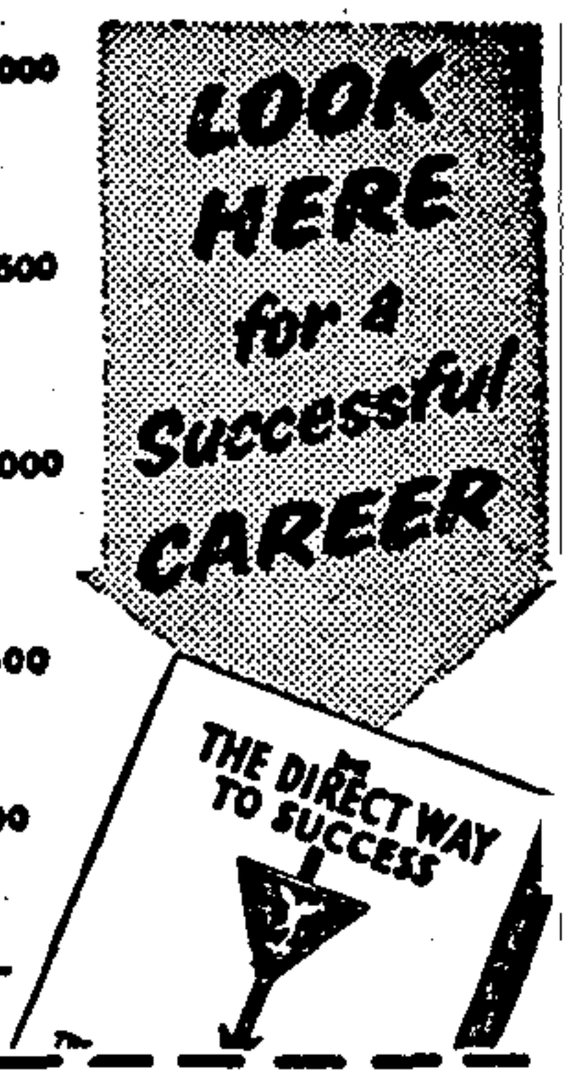

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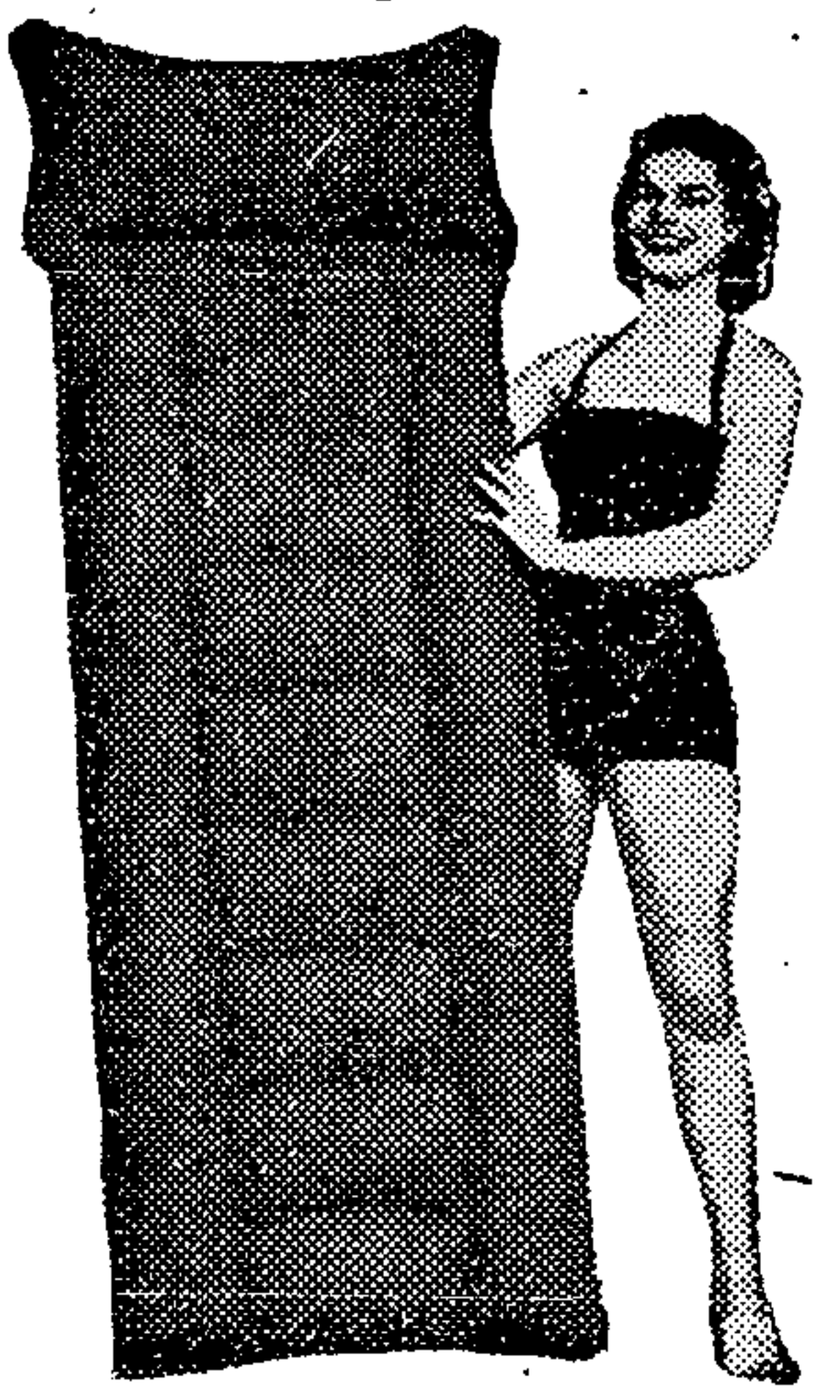

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"Quite understand," he said. In a single moment, Mr. Charlton was raised greatly in his estimation. He looked at him with awe.

"Oh, won't you stay?" Mariette said. "We could ride tomorrow."

Groping again, struggling against the dark eyes and the fragrance of gardenia, powerful even above the penetrating sting of kippers, Mr. Charlton began to say, "No, really. For one thing I've nothing with me. I've no pyjamas."

"'Strufe," Pop said. "Pyjamas?" His admiration and awe for Mr. Charlton now increased still further. He was held transfixed by the fact that here was a man who spoke in words of inaccessible meaning and wore pyjamas to sleep in.

"Sleep in your shirt, old man," he said. "Like I do."

Pop had always slept in his shirt; he found it more convenient that way. Ma, on the other hand, slept in nylon nightgowns. One of them, an unusual pale petunia-pink, Pop liked more than all the rest because it was light, delicate, and transparent. It was wonderful for seeing through. Under it Ma's body appeared like a global map, an expanse of huge explorable mountains, shadowy valleys, and rosy pinnacles.

"I wear pyjamas," Mariette said. "I'll lend you a pair of mine."

"No, really—" Mr. Charlton became utterly speechless as Ma got up, went into the kitchen, and brought back four tins of whole peaches, which she began to open with an elaborate tin-opener on the sideboard.

"Save some of the juice, Ma," Pop said. "I'll have it later with a drop o' gin."

"I think you're about my size," Mariette said, as if everything was now completely settled, so that Mr. Charlton found himself in the centre of a shattering vortex, trapped there by the torturing and incredible thought that presently he would be sleeping in Mariette's own pyjamas, on her own dreaming bed of foam.

Before he could make any further protest about this Primrose poured him a second cup of tea and Pop, leaning across the table, filled it up with whisky.

"You ought to come strawberry-picking," Pop said. Mr. Charlton suddenly remembered the tax form. It mustn't be forgotten, he thought, the tax form. On no account must it be forgotten. "This is very like the last summer we'll ever go strawberry-picking, Mister Charlton. We, you, anybody. You know why?"

Tax form, tax form, tax form, Mr. Charlton kept thinking. Tax form. "No. Why?"

On the television screen a voice announced, "We now take you to Fanshawe Castle, the home of the Duke of Peele," and Ma, ladling out the last of the peaches, crowned by thick ovals of cream, said, "Turn up the contrast. I want to see this. It's got dark again."

"Because," Pop said, "the strawberry lark's nearly over."

Tax form, tax form, tax form, Mr. Charlton thought again. How

was it the strawberry lark was nearly over? Tax form. Tax form.

"Disease," Pop said. "Soon there won't be no strawberries nowhere."

Tax form. "You mean that in this great strawberry-growing district—"

"This districk. Every districk. In two years the strawberry lark'll be over."

"Well, myself, I actually prefer raspberries—"

"The raspberry lark's nearly over as well," Pop said. "Mosaic. Weakening strain. And the plum lark. And the cherry lark. And the apple lark. They can't sell apples for love nor—"

"We're in the library," Ma said. "Pop, look at the library."

Tax form— Mr. Charlton, with piteous desperation, struggled with all the power of his declining concentration to see that the tax form was remembered. I've got to go home, he thought. I've got to start walking. I must remember the tax form. Something brushed his leg. He was startled into a sudden shivering catch of his breath: a moment later the white kitten was on his knee.

"Search me," Pop said. "What are all them on the walls?"

"Must be books," Ma said.

In mute staring concentration Pop sat involved by the picture on the television screen, noisily eating peaches and taking an occasional quick-sucked gulp of whisky and tea. "Never," he said. "Can't be."

"Beautiful home," Ma said. "I like the pelmets. That's what we want. Pelmets like that."

Tax form! Mr. Charlton's mind shouted. Tax form—

"Books?" Pop said. "*All* books?"

"I'll go and find the pyjamas and get them aired," Mariette said. Mr. Charlton emerged from a moment of acute hypnosis to feel her hand reach out, touch him softly, and then begin to draw him away. "Coming? We could try them against you for size."

"The man who owns that owes five million tax," Mr. Charlton said desperately and for no reason at all. "Mr. Larkin, that reminds me—we mustn't forget that form—"

"Perfick place," Pop said. "On the big side though. Suppose they need it for the books."

"Oh, the carpets! Look at the carpets," Ma said. "There must be miles of carpets. Acres."

"He'll have to give it all up," Mr. Charlton said. "The state will take it for taxes. You see what can happen—"

"Come on," Mariette said, and Mr. Charlton, struggling for the last time against the flickering, rising tides of sea-green light rolling across the table in mesmeric, engulfing flow, followed the girl blunderingly into the kitchen, the white kitten softly brushing his legs as he went, the thick night-sweet scent of gardenia penetrating to his blood, seeming to turn it as white as the flower from which it sprang.

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"Fifteen-two, fifteen-four, fifteen-six, pairs eight, three's eleven, three's fourteen, and one for his nob's fifteen."

Pop dealt the cards very fluidly; he counted like a machine.

"I don't understand one for his nob."

"Jack," Pop said. "I told you—one for his nob. Two for his heels. Your deal, Ma." Ma dealt very fluidly, too.

"Got to use your loaf at this game, Mister Charlton," Pop said. "I thought you was an office man? I thought you was good at figures?"

"Rather different sort of figures," Mr. Charlton said.

In the combined turmoil of counting and the glare of the television screen, Mr. Charlton felt a certain madness coming back.

"What you got, Pop?"

"Terrible. What Paddy shot at."

Laughing, Ma kicked Mr. Charlton playfully on the shins under the table. "No wonder he says you got to use your loaf at this game. Your deal next, Mr. Charlton. Your box."

Mr. Charlton, as he picked up the cards, was beginning to feel

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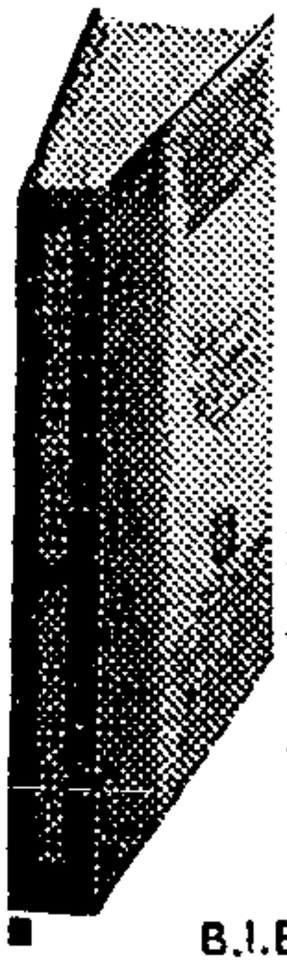

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that he had no loaf to use. He felt awful; his loaf was like a sponge.

"Your box, Mr. Charlton. Give yourself a treat."

"Let him play his own game," Ma said. "Play your own hand, Mr. Charlton. Use your own loaf. What's on telly now?"

"Something about free speech," Mariette said. "Freedom of the press or something."

Pop turned his head, looking casually at the flickering screen.

On it four heated men were, it seemed, about to start fighting—"Wherever conditions of uniform tolerance may be said to obtain—"

"Barmy," Ma said. "Want their heads testing."

"The trouble with telly," Pop said, "is it don't go on long enough."

"You miss it when you're talking," Ma said. "You feel lost, somehow. Don't you think you feel lost, Mr. Charlton?"

Mr. Charlton had to confess he felt lost.

"I like this set better than the other," Ma said. "Better contrast."

"Thirsty, Ma?" Pop said. "I'm thirsty."

During the evening Pop had drunk the remainder of the peach-juice laced with gin, two bottles of Guinness, and a light ale. Mr. Charlton had drunk two glasses of beer. Ma and Mariette had been drinking cider.

"I'll mix a cocktail," Pop said. "Mister Charlton, what about a cocktail?"

"You don't want no more," Ma said. "You'll be pickled."

Pop was already on his feet, moving towards the expensive glass-and-chromium cocktail cabinet that stood in one corner. "Sit down and play your hand."

Pop stood by the cabinet, his pride hurt and offended.

"Never been pickled in me life," he said. "Anyway not more than once or twice a week. And then only standin'-up pickled."

Was there some difference between that and other forms, Mr. Charlton wondered.

"Layin'-down pickled," Pop said, "of course."

"I'm getting tired of crib," Mariette said. "It's hot in here. I'm going to cool off in the yard, Mr. Charlton." Like her father she found it difficult to call Mr. Charlton by his Christian name. "Like to come?"

"After he's had a cocktail," Pop said. "I'm going to mix everybody a special cocktail." While Mariette packed up the cards, the pegs, and the pegboard, Pop stood by the cocktail cabinet consulting a book, a guide to better drinking, given him by Montgomery for Christmas. It was the only book he had ever read.

"Here's one we never tried," Pop said. "Rolls-Royce."

"That sounds nice," Ma said.

"Half vermouth, quarter whisky, quarter gin, dash of orange bitters."

"Dash you will, too," Ma said, "with that lot. It'll blow our heads off."

"Blow summat off," Pop said. "Not sure what though."

Once again Ma started laughing like a jelly.

"How do you like our cocktail cabinet, Mister Charlton?" Pop said. "Only had it at Christmas. Cost us a hundred and fifty."

"Hundred and eighty," Ma said. "We had that other model in the end. The one with the extra sets of goblets. The brandy lot. You remember. And the silver bits for hot punch and all that."

With confusion and awe, Mr. Charlton stared at the cocktail cabinet over which Pop hovered, mixing the drinks, in his shirt-sleeves. The cabinet, he realized for the first time, seemed shaped like an elaborate glass-and-silver ship.

"Am I mistaken?" he said. "Or is it a ship?"

"Spanish galleon," Pop said. "Heigh-ho and a bottle o' rum, and all that lark."

When the cocktail was mixed, Pop poured it into four large cut-glass tumblers embellished with scarlet cockerels. He had mixed it double, he said. It saved a lot of time like that.

"Try it first," Ma said. "We don't want it if it's no good, Rolls-Royce or no Rolls-Royce. Besides, you might fall down dead."

Pop drained the shaker. "Perfick," he said. "This'll grow hair."

"By the way," Ma said, "talking about Rolls-Royce, did you do anything about that one?"

"Sunday," Pop said. "The chap's a stockbroker. Colonel Forbes. He's only down weekends."

"Pop's mad on a Rolls," Ma explained to Mr. Charlton.

"By the way, Mister Charlton," Pop said, "what was that about that feller on telly owing five million tax? Was that right?"

"Perfectly correct."

"What for?"

"Death duties."

"Deaf duties!" Pop said. "Deaf duties! I feel like murder every time I hear deaf duties!"

Pop, snorting with disgust and irritation, struck the table with the palm of his hand and as if by a pre-arranged signal the light in the television went out.

Ma uttered a sudden cry as if something terrible had happened. Mariette got up suddenly and switched the set off, and there floated by Mr. Charlton's face, as she passed, a fresh wave of gardenia, warm as the evening itself, disturbed and disturbing as she moved.

"That made my head jump," Ma said. "I thought a valve had gone."

"Closing down, that's all," Pop said. "Eleven o'clock and they're closing down. Hardly got started."

Pop, giving another snort of disgust about death duties and the brief and contemptible daily compass of television, handed round the cocktails. "Cheers, everybody," he said, raising his glass. "Here's to the strawberry lark. Roll on Monday."

Mr. Charlton drank. A wave of pure alcohol burnt the roots

off his tongue. He was utterly unable to speak for some moments and could only listen with undivided and searing agony to a question, first from Pop and then from Mariette, about whether he could be with them on Monday for the strawberry lark.

"I, I—" A sensation as of a white-hot stiletto descending rapidly towards Mr. Charlton's navel prevented the sentence from developing beyond a single choking word.

"Make yourself fifteen or twenty quid in no time," Pop said. "All the strawberries you can eat. And a pound free every day. You can gather a hundred and fifty pounds a day."

"I, I—I—" Burning tears came into Mr. Charlton's eyes. He succeeded in murmuring at last, with a tongue cauterized of all feeling and in a voice that did not belong to him, something about work, office, and having no leave.

"You could always come in the evenings," Mariette said. "Plenty of people do." As she said this she again turned and looked at him. The eyes seemed more tenderly, intensely, darkly penetrative than ever and he began flushing deeply. "It's lovely in the evenings," Mariette said. "Absolutely lovely."

Another draught of alcohol, snatched by Mr. Charlton in another desperate moment of speechlessness, injected fire into remote interior corners of his body that he did not know existed.

"This is a perfick pick-me-up," Pop said. "We must all have another one of these." Mr. Charlton despaired and passed a groping hand over his face. His mouth burnt, as from eating ginger. He heard Ma agree the cocktail was a beauty. He actually heard her say that they owed everybody in the neighbourhood a drink.

"What say we have a cocktail party and give them this one? This'll get under their skin."

That, Mr. Charlton heard himself saying, was what was happening to him, but nobody seemed to hear a voice that was already inexplicably far away, except that Ma once again began laughing, piercingly, the salmon jumper shaking like a vast balloon.

"A few more of these and you won't see me for dust," she said.

"A few more," Mr. Charlton heard himself saying. "A few more?"

"First refill coming up, Mister Charlton. How do you like it? Ma, I bet this would go well with a bloaterpaste sandwich."

Something about this remark made Mr. Charlton start laughing too. This enlivening development was a signal for Pop to strike Mr. Charlton a severe blow in the back, exactly as he had done Ma, and call him a rattlin' good feller. "Feel you're one of the family. Feel we've known you years. That right, Ma?"

That was right, Ma said. That was the truth. That was how they felt about him.

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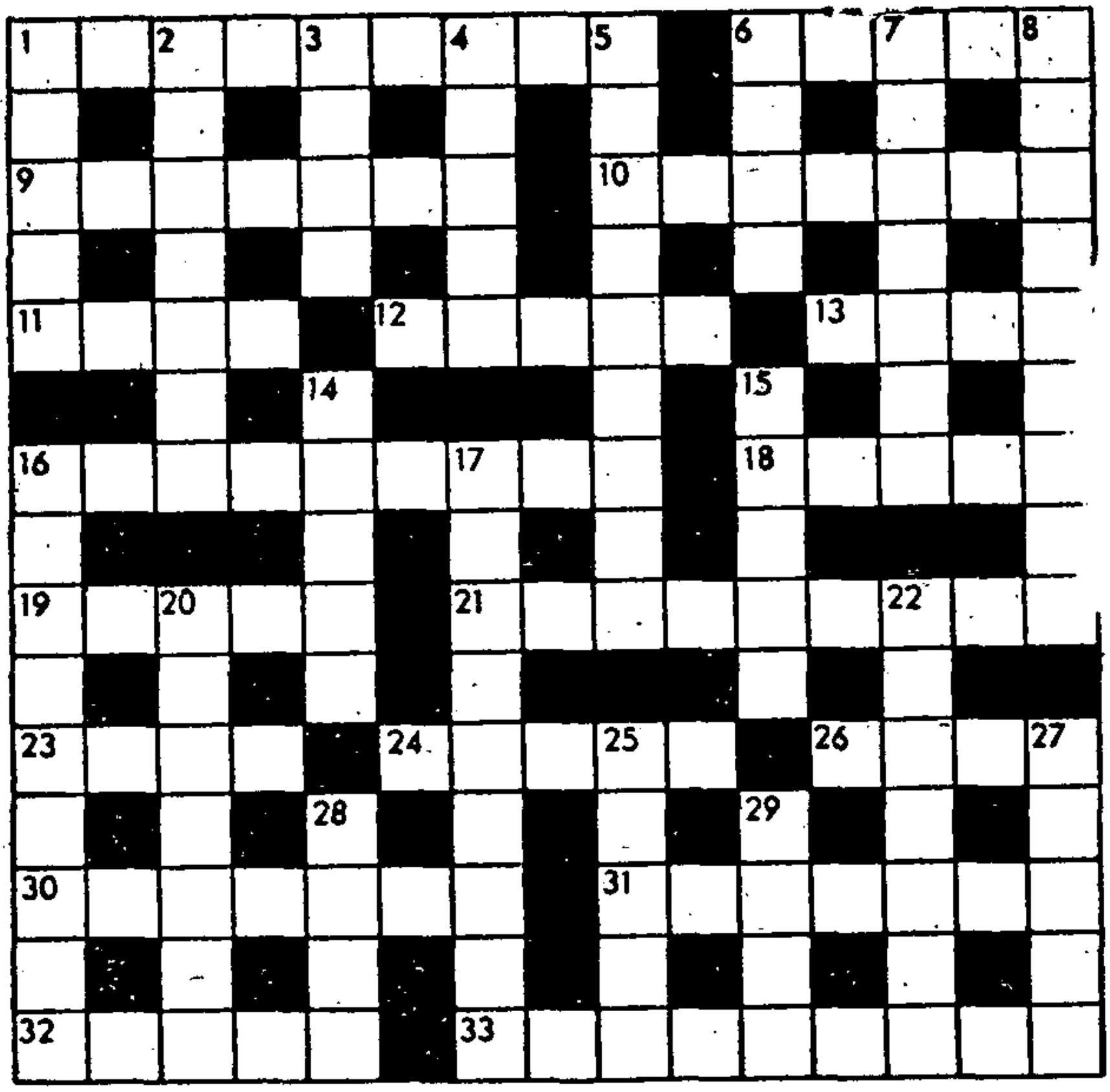
★ ***Mr. Charlton, now "one of the family," finds life full of unexpected adventure in the second part of The Darling Buds of May, by H. E. Bates, in next month's Argosy on sale May 9***

ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

★

Solution on Page 115

★



CLUES

Across

1 Would make a churchwarden flare up (4-5).

6 Sounds like weak pretence (5).

9 Pent with archaic leavings—omen (7).

10 Knows about pugs, spoor fellow (7).

11 This and 13 are never waiters (4).

12 Eminent musketeer in Greece (5).

13 See 11 (4).

16 Sparkling sallies from Mum (6, 3).

18 Fashion in Sarajevo —guess what ! (5).

19 Clinching fixture (5).

21 Jack-of-all-trades may have had a multiplicity of these (9).

23 O, her love was Leander (4).

24 Throwaway term of endearment ? (5).

26 Steady business (4).

30 I'm a neat sort to enliven (7).

31 Potatoes may be, but not to the wall (7).

32 Does a Norse dwarf catch fish ? (5).

33 Current gyration at sea (9).

Down

1 It's after a pip, what a lark (5).

2 It's also olivine (7).

3 Wandering Nile's right to keep (4).

4 Contact witness in shady way (3, 2).

5 Fair exchange (3,3,3).

6 "The fair breeze blew, the white —— flew" (Coleridge) (4).

7 Sounds like notion of a penman (7).

8 Verbal economy (9).

14 "This fell sergeant —— " (Shakespeare) (5).

15 One of the quinquireme's cargoes (5).

16 Parade to celebrate All Fools' Day (5, 4).

17 Portable steelyard (5-4).

20 At green I go ; it induces dizziness (7).

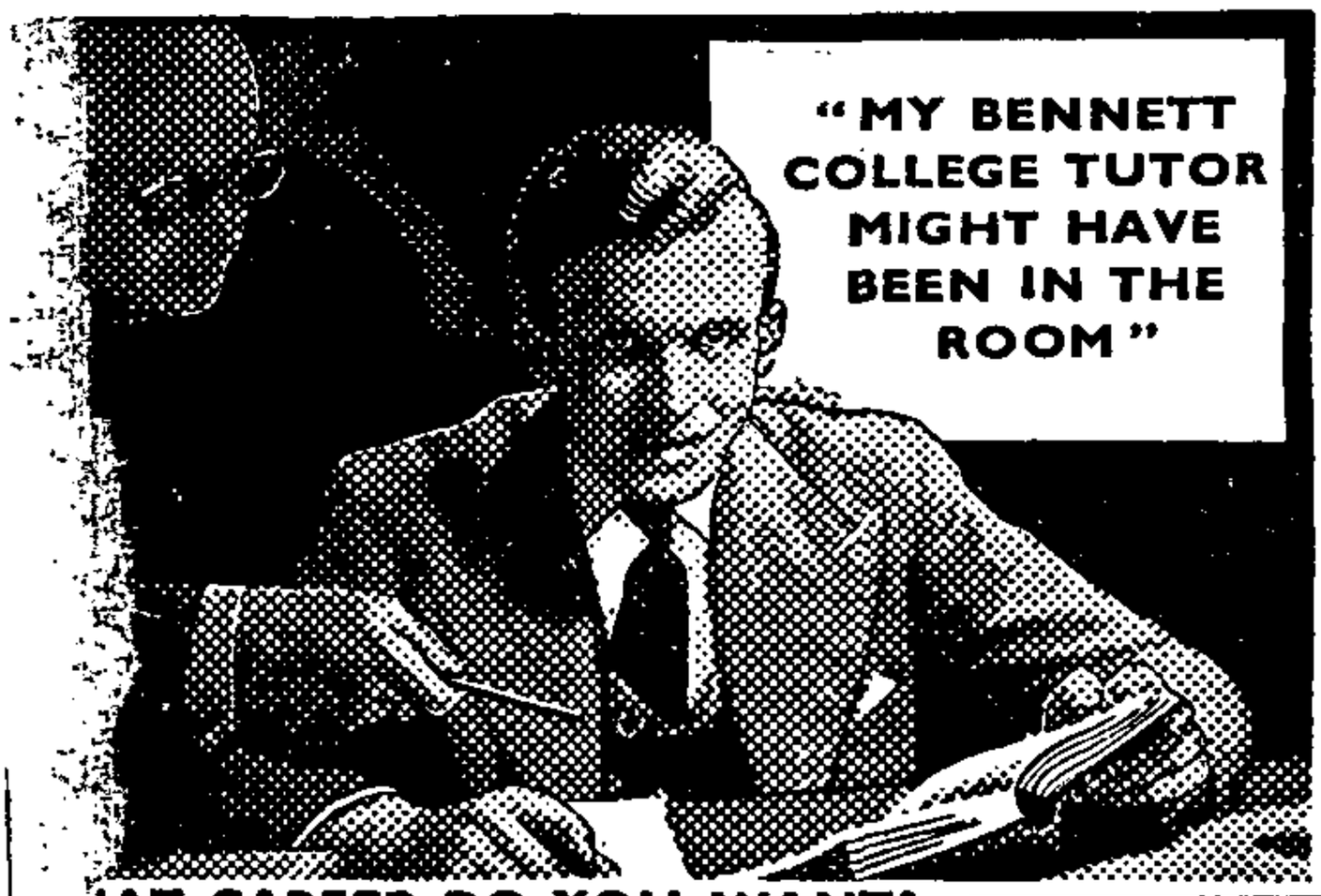
22 When a Lady's, it's an orchid (7).

25 Gave rise to first Bloomer (5).

27 She'll walk, if asked poetically (5).

28 Moment of gravity when Eve picked the apple (4).

29 Raised platform (4).



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Student 357/3015: I have had my story accepted by **BLACKWOODS** who are paying me £25 for it. *Student* 778/2119: I thought it might interest you to know that **THE COUNTRYMAN** has accepted a short article of mine on an old country custom . . . *Student* 184/315: As you suggested, I submitted the articles to the **NEW STATESMAN.** One was published on the 17th July, I have also had an article accepted by **MEN ONLY** . . . *Student* 181/282: You may be interested to hear that I had a letter from the Editor of **ARGOSY**; they offered me Twenty-five Guineas for my story . . . *Student* 591/287: You will be pleased that my article submitted for my Second Lesson was published in the **DAILY MIRROR** and I received Six Guineas for it . . . *Student* 120/288: I have established contact with the Editor of **PUNCH.** The item was accepted for "Charivaria" and is a good start. *Student* 1179/347: I succeeded in getting four Big Game stories into **COURIER** and another about "Shrove Tuesday." Another article appeared in the August issue of **BLACK WOODS** . . . *Student* 1954/15, I have just corrected a proof of my story for **WIDE WORLD**: they have since accepted another. I have sent in a third . . . *Student* 171/162: I have sold my story to **EVERYWOMAN** for 25 guineas . . . *Student* 1106/156: The B.B.C. accepted the script for the Light Programme—fee 3 guineas—after my first lesson . . . *Student* 141/76: The article which I write for the Second Test paper appeared in the **SUNDAY-MAIL.** Thanks for the recommendation.